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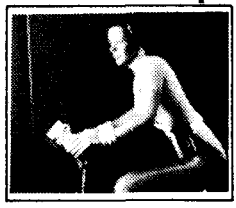

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FRANK LANGELLA
appearing on Broadway in
"Sherlock's Last Case"

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a *NEW* short story by

JOE GORES

As a footnote to the dinner served early in this tour de force by Joe Gores, published last year in Japan under the title "Plot It Yourself," Mr. Gores says: "Discerning readers doubtless will realize that this is, according to The Nero Wolfe Cook Book, *the ideal dinner for The Detective. It is being served in this story in honor of all the sleuthful readers who will uncover the real murderer's identity before it is officially revealed . . ."*

DETECTIVITIS, ANYONE?

by JOE GORES

Wasn't it Shakespeare who suggested that we kill all the lawyers? Too drastic? Well, then, what about *one* lawyer?

I am his murderer.

Can you catch me?

I won't lie to you. Oh, I might *tease* you a little. Do a bit of business over here with my left hand to hold your eye, say, while over here my right hand is doing, oh, maybe, murder.

A widely held misconception is that Beverly Hills is inhabited by movie folk. But only eight percent of the mansions on those wide, shady, deserted streets, drowsy with the swish of automatic sprinklers and the clip-clip of hedge shears, are owned by the Sly Stallones and the Jane Fondas. In the rest live doctors and dentists and psychiatrists and attorneys and clothes-hanger manufacturers and Rolls Royce salesmen.

Take that white mansion with stately southern pillars set well back from Beverly Glen on an acre of lawn. It houses—pardon me, *housed*—an entertainment law attorney named Eric Stalker. On the

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night of his murder, streetlights were going on as Stalker parked his Lagonda (one of twenty-four imported into the U.S. that year) behind a white Continental, a midnight-blue Rolls, and his stepdaughter's red bat-wing Mercedes coupe.

Stalker was a handsome, grey-haired, vital fifty-six, with the tanning-salon's all-over mahogany skin color and the spring to his step that only hours in the gym can give. As he closed the car door—a solid, monied clunk—an eight-year-old Chev Nova, with one fender a different color from the rest, crunched to a stop on the gravel drive behind the Lagonda.

Chuck Hoffe fit his machine: early thirties, tough-looking, mean of face and cold of eye, wearing the sort of off-the-rack suit associated in the popular mind with the honest cop.

"Chuck—you don't mind if I call you Chuck, do you? I'm delighted that you—"

Hoffe shook Stalker's arm off his shoulder almost testily. "If you invited me here tonight hoping I'll change my testimony tomorrow—"

Stalker shifted his slim attache case to emphasize it. "Let's go to my study before we join the others, Chuck. I have something in here that you'll find intriguing."

Eric Stalker, leading this vice cop off toward the French doors to his study, is playing a dangerous game with Hoffe and with his other guests now congregating in the dining room. Did I say dangerous? Deadly, rather. Because, as Dickens once pointed out, if there were no bad people, there would be no good lawyers. Stalker is a *very* good lawyer. And his guests—well, they're the sort of people who *need* very good lawyers.

It was a small formal dining room, the walls covered by Thirteenth Century tapestries depicting the cardinal sin of gluttony with all the hypocritically self-indulgent detail so beloved of the medieval artist. The chandelier was Czechoslovakian crystal and the flatware so solidly silver that the forks could be easily bent by hand if one were so gauche as to do so.

No nouvelle cuisine here: shad roe *aux fines herbes,* a duckling in Flemish olive sauce, and pork fillets braised in a nice spiced Burgundy, served with polenta. They had lingered over the fig-and-cherry tart. Stalker finally rose and tapped his water glass with his knife. Conversation ceased abruptly.

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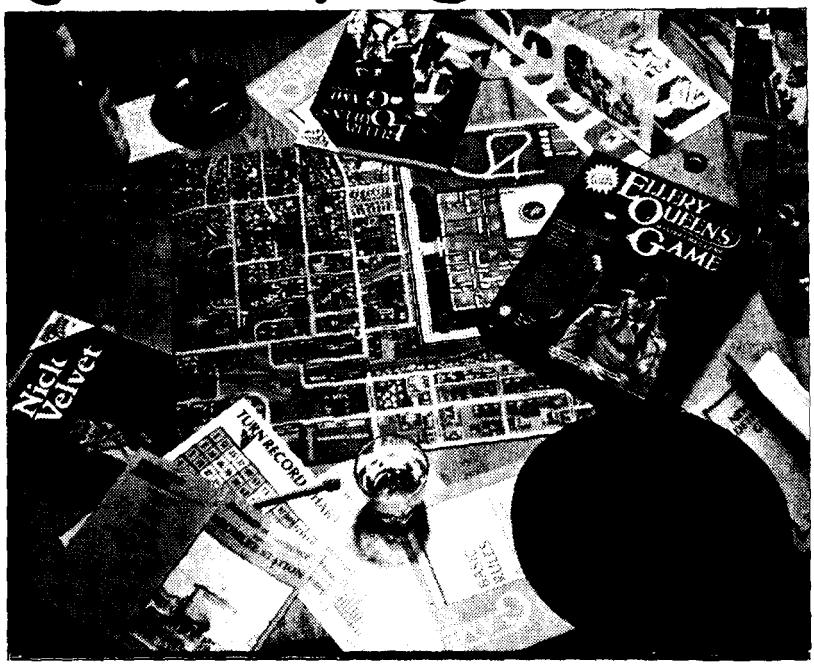
Quit Playing Around!



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"Yes, of course. You each know why you're here, don't you?" He began walking slowly down the length of the table behind their chairs, all eyes moving with him. "I hinted—"

He stopped behind his stepdaughter, Merrilee, a sensual, spoiled-looking woman in her early twenties, not at all beautiful but with an obviously very bedable look about her. As he leaned over to speak above her, she stared straight ahead, a sullen expression on her face.

"Right, Merrilee? I no more than *hinted*—"

"Yes, Father. Only hinted."

He paused behind Jon Norliss, a distinguished, white-haired man of about seventy who was lighting a cigar as if at peace with himself and the world. He seemed indifferent to Stalker's face beaming over his shoulder.

"Yes. Hinted that I might *give* each of you something."

Norliss nodded, turning his cigar to get it burning evenly. Stalker nodded also, and moved on to Andy Bowman, an obvious health addict in his mid-forties, with a handsome face and an assured, slightly sardonic air.

"Something that you want very much." Stalker's voice suddenly snapped. "Isn't that so, Andy?"

"Yes, Eric," said Bowman evenly.

Stalker had passed around the end of the table to Chuck Hoffe's place. The plainclothesman was half turned to watch him.

"I have thought each of your situations over very carefully indeed," said Stalker. "And I have decided that I'm not giving any of you one damned thing."

He nodded, beaming, and slipped out of the room through the door behind him. Hoffe already was halfway to his feet, his face contorted, exclaiming, "I could kill you for this, Stalker!"

All of them, stunned, were on their feet by this time, crowding through the doorway after Stalker.

"You promised me!"

"I was led to believe—"

"Your own daughter, you couldn't—"

But Stalker stepped into his study and closed the door behind him. They heard the bolt being shot home. Hoffe strode angrily to the massive front door, face set and eyes murderous.

What was it The Saint used to say Chief Inspector Teal from Scotland Yard was being afflicted with? Detectivitis, I believe. I can

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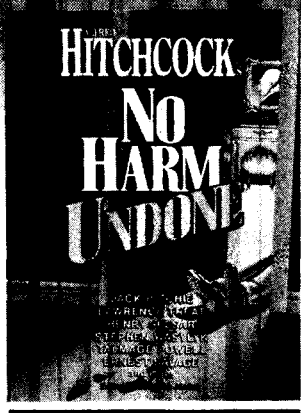

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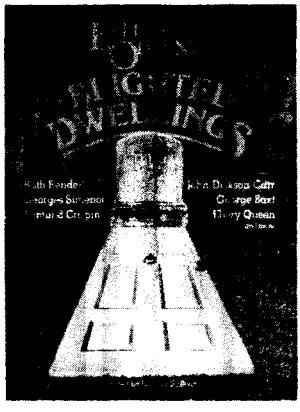

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see you sharpening your wits for the challenge I am setting you, my friend. Beware of detectivitis—what is needed here is *observation.* Watch closely now. No detail is too minuscule to be unimportant. Don't let your eyes deceive you.

Stalker paused to grin at himself and fuss with his carnation in the ornate full-length mirror fastened to the back of the door. Then he crossed the thick oriental carpet to a painting beside the French doors behind his desk. He swung the hinged painting back against the wall and worked the combination of the safe it concealed. After opening the safe door against the back of the painting, he left it that way, taking nothing from it.

He sat down in the heavy leather swivel chair behind his desk and surveyed the room with a self-satisfied look on his face. He was quite alone. He took paper and an envelope from the top side drawer and began writing with an old-fashioned inkwell pen. The pen made scratching sounds in the silence of the study.

I told you I wouldn't deceive you, so we will take a quick peek at the rest of the characters in our little drama as Stalker writes his rather nasty screed in his locked study.

Stepdaughter Merrilee is at the makeup table in her room on the second floor, shredding a handkerchief with her teeth and cursing her stepfather. She abruptly gets to her feet and starts for the door with great resolve.

Stalker's partner in the law office, courtly-looking Jon Norliss, is out in back by the pool, pausing to knock the ash off his cigar. He loses control, shreds it against the retaining wall. Now he is turning determinedly back toward the house.

Stalker's Beverly Hills physician, the dashing Andy Bowman, is throwing up into the toilet on the second floor. He suffers a spastic stomach in moments of ultimate decision.

The vice-cop, Chuck Hoffe, has been walking in circles on the front lawn, smoking a cigarette down to the filter. He throws it away with sudden resolution and strides rapidly off.

Detectivitis, anyone?

Stalker looked up into the face of the person in the middle of the room. In that frozen moment of realization, he could see himself exactly as that person saw him.

A handsome, distinguished man, old-fashioned pen in his left

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hand, inkwell open on the upper-left-hand corner of the desk blotter. Behind him, the painting swung back against the wall to the right of the wall safe it usually concealed, with the safe door still open against the back of the painting. To the left of the opened safe were the French doors, drapes closed, door latched.

After a moment, as if there were no one else in the room with him, he turned over the sheet of foolscap to blot it, then folded it into the envelope. As he wrote on the envelope, he looked up into that face again.

"You can't possibly think you're going to get away with this, you know," he said in a voice which strove for lightness.

There was no response. Was that perhaps a flicker of fear in Stalker's eyes? He licked the envelope and put it in the desk, his hands resting on the edge of the still-open drawer.

"Take some time to reconsider?" he asked almost hopefully.

There was no response.

He shouted, "All right, then, damn you, get it ov—"

There was a single gunshot, shockingly loud in the enclosed room. Stalker was slammed backward against his chair by the blast, his arms flying wide with its force.

A smoking .357 Magnum thudded to the carpet several feet from the desk. Stalker was tipped back as if sleeping, legs splayed out under the desk, arms hanging laxly outside the arms of the chair. Red had blossomed on his shirt-front.

A silhouette loomed up against the French doors. Cupped hands circled a face pressed against the glass as the person outside tried to peer in through the closed curtains. The latch rattled, but held.

From beyond the bolted door of the study came confused sounds, muffled voices. Someone began beating on the door, then a key was turned in the lock. The knob was turned, rattled. The door would not open. The bolt held.

From the French doors came the sound of breaking glass.

In the hallway, Merrilee was still trying her key in the lock when the bolt was drawn from the inside. Bowman was crowding her shoulder as the door swung in to frame Chuck Hoffe and Jon Norliss in the opening.

"Stalker's dead," Hoffe said matter-of-factly.

Merrilee and Bowman shoved past him into the room without speaking, to get a glimpse of the body slumped behind the desk.

Ah, yes, my friend, these are the vital moments for the little grey

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cells, as Hercule Poirot was fond of calling them. Everything is laid bare for the inquiring mind that wants to know. Remember, there are only the study door and the French doors. Remember, also, that everyone is suspect.

"Look—don't touch," warned Hoffe. "I have to call forensics. But before I do—"

He stood on the other side of the desk from the dead man, the others ranging naturally behind him. He pointed as he spoke. "Just so we agree on the physical evidence. Stalker is slumped in his chair behind his desk, dead, shot once through the old pump. Powder burns around the wound. The inkwell on the upper-right corner of the desk has been overturned and the ink has spilled out. A .357 Magnum is lying on the floor approximately ten feet from the right edge of the desk. It is probably the murder weapon, probably dropped there by the killer. Okay so far?"

There were several assenting sounds. He went on.

"On the wall behind the desk is a hinged painting, swung open so it is lying against the wall to the left of a wall safe, which is also open. To the right of the safe, the French doors are now open. One pane is broken and glass is shattered inward across the floor. Those doors were locked when I tried them from the outside—I had to bust one of the panes to get in."

No reactions. Hoffe wrapped a handkerchief around his hand to pick up the phone receiver. He tapped out a number. "Since we're agreed on the crime scene, I'll call it in."

No one dissented. Bowman, ever the physician, crouched beside the body to check the obviously dead wrist for a pulse. Norliss stared glumly at the body.

Bowman stood up and shrugged. "The Grim Reaper and all that."

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord," intoned Norliss.

"Vengeance is a .357 Magnum slug through the heart," said Hoffe, coming up beside them.

"Stop this! All of you!" cried Merrilee suddenly. They turned to look at her in surprise. There were tears in her eyes. "Sarcasm and platitudes when—when my father is *dead. Murdered!*" She turned suddenly on Hoffe. "And *you* just said, a few minutes ago, that you were going to kill him!"

For just an instant, Hoffe looked guilty, then his normal brash, cocky manner reasserted itself. He started striding up and down the carpet beside the desk, gesturing as he did.

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"Sure, I'll admit I was steamed. That's why I went out to smoke a cigarette, to get control of myself. But then I heard this shot. I ran back, tried the French doors—they were locked, as I said. I looked through the curtains and saw him here—dead. So I—"

"You could have opened those doors earlier!" cried Merrilee.

"I didn't like him any better than the rest of you," said Hoffe patiently, "but why would I kill him?"

At that moment, a strange voice said, "Raoul, I want you to put your hand on her shoulder."

See everyone look in different directions? Now look at the twenty-nine-inch screen of the floor-model TV console in the corner. Yes, a pornographic film now flickers there! A bedroom with a handsome naked man in bed with a naked blonde girl who doesn't look out of her teens. Might not this be a clue?

The man put his hand on the girl's shoulder. The unknown voice said, "Turn her toward you—"

There was a loud click and the screen went blank. Hoffe had pushed past Bowman to the video-machine controls.

"I think we should see the rest of it," said Bowman. "A porn flick—and Mr. Hoffe here is a vice cop."

Hoffe, meeting nothing but stony dislike in any eye, stepped back with a shrug. "All right," he said, "show the damned thing. See what it gets you."

The porn movie flickered back on. But this time, as the man reached again for the naked girl, the director's voice burst in, "Who the hell *is* this clown? Somebody get him out of here!"

The camera slewed wildly around the empty warehouse with the bedroom set and lights clustered in the middle of it, then focused on Hoffe and the young vulpine-looking director.

"She's underage, baby," Hoffe said, flashing his tin. "In this state, seventeen'll get you twenty."

"Take five, everybody!" yelled the director. In a stricken undertone to Hoffe, he added, "Hey, man, gimme a break!"

The camera maintained follow focus as they moved away from the set. The director took a roll of bills from his pocket.

"I can beat this thing in court—the girl's older than she looks. But our production deadlines would suffer. I wouldn't want you to lose by not making an arrest—"

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Hoffe clicked the machine off again. "That's when I busted him. So you see, Stalker didn't have any knives sticking in me."

"He told me he was going to force you to change your testimony in court tomorrow on this case," said Bowman. After a beat, in an almost admiring voice, he added, "Our Eric was good at things like that."

Hoffe sneered. "Not this time. I have this guy cold."

But the porn scene flashed back on—Bowman's work. "Oh, I won't lose." Hoffe pocketed the roll of money, *then* clapped cuffs on the startled director. "Because you're under arrest, pal, for making pornographic films with an underage girl."

The screen went to snow, then blank. Hoffe sneered at the distaste in their faces.

"Okay, so Stalker had me over a barrel with this film and made me promise in writing to change my testimony tomorrow. He said he'd give me the tape after supper, but—"

"But he didn't and you killed him," said Merrilee.

"Except the tape is still here, girlie!" sneered Hoffe. "Would I kill him and then not take it? Hell, no! This was a grudge job." He turned suddenly. "And *you* had a hell of a grudge against him."

Norliss, caught off-guard, wet suddenly dry lips. He stammered, "That's nonsense. I don't know what you might have heard, but that disagreement in his office was just business."

Bowman, still crouched in front of the VCR machine to check the tape cabinet beneath it, had taken out Hoffe's tape and inserted another. He pushed the PLAY button and stood up. "Maybe this will tell us what kind of business."

On the TV monitor flashed Stalker's office, taken from a hidden camera. Stalker was behind his desk, dictating a memo. The sound quality was excellent.

"He wired his own office!" gasped Norliss.

The door burst open and Norliss stormed in. He stopped in front of his partner's desk.

"I arrived this morning and found my name removed from my door! I'm going to the Bar Association and—"

"Tell them about the Gorsuch case?" asked Stalker silkily.

"I—I don't know what you mean."

Stalker was on his feet, towering over the older, frailer man. "I don't mind your suborning witnesses, Jon, but when you do it so clumsily that I have to spend a great deal of money to get back the evidence and save the firm's name, well—"

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"But, Eric, you're the one who demanded I offer—"

"Just sign this letter of resignation, Jon, and I'll turn over the evidence to you. Otherwise—"

The screen went to snow.

I believe it was Cervantes who said that the only comfort of the miserable is to have partners in their woes. But Jon Norliss found small comfort with his partner here tonight. I'm sure he expected to get back the evidence at dinner, and when he learned that he wasn't going to, well, perhaps he—

But there, I'm displaying a touch of detectivitis myself!

Bowman chuckled and shook his head as he took the tape back out of the VCR. "So Eric stiffed you, too, Jon. Just like he did Hoffe. Had you sign the resignation, then kept the evidence against you. So typical. But—"

"What about you?" Norliss burst in angrily. "Your motive for wanting him dead was better than mine. He could have taken my past—but he planned to take *your* future."

Bowman swept an angry hand across the tape titles in the cabinet. "Where's the tape with my name on it, then?"

Before Norliss could answer, Hoffe shot a hand into Bowman's inside coat pocket and yanked out a video tape.

"Right here," he said, shoving Bowman roughly aside.

In a moment, Stalker's office again came up on the screen. Now it was Bowman and the attorney facing each other across the familiar desk, seen from the familiar angle.

"I've decided not to invest in your clinic, after all, Andy," said Stalker in an almost indifferent voice.

Bowman's face crumpled.

"But—but, I— If you don't give me the money— I pledged *everything,* my home, my—"

"I've just found out there was nothing wrong with my gall bladder that a change of diet wouldn't have cured. But *you*—"

Bowman was pleading now. "Eric, please! Maybe the operation *was* marginal, but—but in checking the X-rays afterward I found a—a shadow on your lung. I'm not a specialist in that field, but it could be—"

"Malignant?" Stalker laughed coarsely. "You'd say anything to save the clinic, wouldn't you? Well, crawl for me, Andy. Convince me. If you do, next week, maybe—just maybe . . ."

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I think it was an ancient Roman who said it was better to use medicine at the outset than at the last moment. Poor Dr. Bowman! All those financial ills, and he went to Stalker for his medicine. And what did he get for his troubles? Being prime suspect in a murder case. Unless you believe him, of course.

Bowman was clutching his video tape anxiously to his chest. He gave what he thought was a little laugh. "Oh, Eric liked to make people sweat, sure, but I *know* he was going to back my clinic." When nobody spoke, he went on, "If he *did* have cancer, he would have died in a few months. I'd have been a fool to risk a murder charge just so all his money would go to—*her.*"

His voice and gesture directed all eyes to Merrilee. They found her using the mirror on the back of the door to freshen her lipstick. She caught their reflection in the glass and laughed.

"Me? Kill Daddy? I *loved* him!" She turned to face them, a sneer on her full lips. "I don't *need* Daddy's money. I have the trust fund my mother left me."

"Administered by Eric!" exclaimed Norliss. "He had full discretion to revoke the trust, and just last week he told me he was drawing up papers to that effect—to sign tomorrow."

"And when I came down from the second floor," exclaimed Bowman, "she was right beside that door, with the key in her hand. She said she heard a shot, and I believed her. But—"

"Well, well, well," interrupted Hoffe softly. "The little stepdaughter had motive, means, and opportunity—the classic big three for premeditated murder."

Merrilee had paled. She whirled back to the mirror and pressed her face against it, making a double image of herself. "Stop it," she cried, "all of you! I *did* hear a shot, just like I said! And I heard Daddy in here talking with someone, but I couldn't hear the words." She faced them again, pale features contorted. "You can't *prove* that Daddy planned to—"

She stopped, mouth gaping, as Eric Stalker's rich, sardonic tones filled the room. "A tender—if drunken—scene."

They looked at the corpse, then at the TV. Merrilee's bed was wide, opulent, with a trail of scattered masculine and feminine garments leading to it across the floor. On it, two naked people were leaping guiltily apart.

"The tape was in the safe," explained Hoffe from the VCR machine. "He had his own kid's room wired for pictures."

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"Stepkid's," corrected Bowman almost lasciviously.

On the screen, boy and woman had gotten tangled up in each other and the black-satin top-sheet had fallen on the floor beside the bed. Stalker entered the frame.

"You—out."

The boy scrambled to his feet. "Hey, old man, I ain't scared of you!"

"You should be. Now get out before I—"

"Jerry, do what he says," said the film Merrilee.

"Stop it!" shrieked the real Merrilee.

"*We've* gone through it," said Hoffe. "Now it's your turn."

On the screen, the boy stormed out with his clothes, slamming the door behind him. Stalker was staring at Merrilee as she hastily pulled on a robe over her nakedness.

"I'm cutting off your allowance, Merrilee."

She tried to embrace him, fawning. "Daddy, I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I had too much to drink and— You can't!"

He shook her off. "I can and will. It was important to your mother that you be a decent person. I'll revoke the trust if that's what it takes to—"

Merrilee slammed her hand down on the VCR controls and the screen went blank. She turned to glare at the others. "All *right*, he'd taken my allowance and was threatening to revoke the trust. But he promised that if I straightened up he'd give it all back to me!"

"But tonight at dinner he told all of us that he wasn't giving us one damned thing," said Hoffe.

"It could have been any one of us," breathed Norliss.

"Or all of us," said Bowman.

"Sure—or none of us," Merrilee added sarcastically.

Hoffe merely laughed.

What was it that Holmes told Watson? That when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth? Of course, our suspects' stories should have told you who I, the murderer, am—as well as why I did it. But if you're *still* confused, remember those three classic elements of premeditated murder: motive, means, and opportunity.

"What are you laughing at?" snapped Bowman.

"You all act like this is one of those board games," said Hoffe.

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"Colonel Mustard in the kitchen with a noose. But this is *real* murder, not—"

"Do you know who did it?" demanded Norliss.

"I'm a detective, aren't I?"

"The police will be here any minute."

"I didn't call them yet. No use going down unnecessarily."

"For—murder?"

"Nah, little girl—for taking a bribe. As for murder—" Hoffe began pacing beside the desk again. Their eyes followed him. "Was it Hoffe, the corrupt cop? No, I had to smash the French doors to get in here and Norliss was with me when I did. Which takes care of him, too. We alibi each other."

Bowman broke in. "If you're saying it was me—"

"You couldn't profit from his murder—you'd still be ruined. And why give him a quick and easy death when he might face a long and lingering one? Besides, Merrilee was at the study door when you came downstairs."

Heads swiveled back to Merrilee, cowering against the now-silent TV.

"Merrilee, the disaffected stepdaughter," said Hoffe. "Motive, means, opportunity. Even had a key to get in here." He grinned. "But the door was bolted on the inside, her key couldn't do her any good. It's just like she said. How'd she put it? 'Or none of us?' Yeah. Or none of us."

"But—but there wasn't anyone else," Norliss said.

"Sure, there was," Hoffe told him. "Stalker blew himself away."

But you knew I was the killer all the time, didn't you? Because I was the only person who could have done it, from the moment I shot the bolt on that door. I *warned* you that no one could be eliminated as a suspect.

Who was I talking to just before I died? Why, to my own image in the mirror on the back of the door, of course. I even saw myself and the room reversed, if you will remember—pen in my left hand, inkwell on the left corner of the blotter, the picture and safe door open to the right-hand side, the French doors to the left of the safe.

Hoffe, in repeating the scene after they broke in, listed each item in its proper place. The gun was ten feet from the desk—where my involuntary death spasm threw it. That spasm knocked over the inkwell. There were powder burns because I put the muzzle against my chest before I pulled the trigger.

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Yes, I committed the perfect crime.

"Almost," said Hoffe. He was holding the sheet of paper on which Stalker had been writing just before his death. On the opened envelope was written: *To be opened one year after my death.* "Lucky I don't believe in dying wishes," he added.

Then he read aloud from the letter:

" 'To whom it may concern: When this is read, I will be dead a year—by my own hand. Last week I was told I might have cancer, and yesterday confirmed the diagnosis with a specialist. Inoperable. Since I do not wish to be reduced to ridicule by pain and fear, I am ending it now, arranging it so that one of my so-called friends will be convicted of my murder. A conviction each of them more richly deserves than I do this death sentence passed upon me by nature.'

"That's a matter of opinion," said Hoffe.

There was the snap of a cigarette lighter. Stalker's note started to burn. Each person already had his own videotape.

Damn! I should have foreseen that none of them would honor the last wishes of a poor, dying, betrayed man.

It was one of the Victorian novelists, I believe, who said that when you go into an attorney's office, you will have to pay for it, first or last.

What I have realized only too late, alas, is that this holds true even if you're the attorney.

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a ***NEW*** short story by

JEFFRY SCOTT

If you are a regular reader of EQMM, you're aware of the fact that, unlike some American editors, we usually retain British slang in British stories—we delight in it, in fact, and think it adds strongly to a story's flavor. It is important, of course, that the meaning be clear and so when in doubt we ask. And so we wrote Jeffry Scott about the phrase "a dot on the card." And in a letter dated "Bank Holiday Sunday, 24 May," he wrote back:

"Sorry, having grown up with the phrase, it never occurred to me that 'dot on the card' was an arcane form of words! You're right, it means the likeliest suspect or a virtual certainty—comes from tabloid newspapers here in the 1930s, whose horse-racing pages summed up form for illiterates by putting a big black blob against the horse with the best track record. 'Sticks out like a sore thumb' is an alternative version which occurs."

No, thank you, we'll stick with the dot in this charming new, slangy new story from an EQMM contributor with one of the best track records in our long history . . .

A DOT ON THE CARD

by JEFFRY SCOTT ●

It's a cliche—but then, abiding truths so often are—that the sure sign of growing old is when policemen start looking like schoolboy impostors in uniform. Constable Chadbon had given needless anxiety to people in their prime, though, because he really was absurdly young, in a pinkly new-minted fashion that suggested he shouldn't have been out on his own after dark.

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Probably that was why, on deciding to break the rules of a lifetime, Mr. Salkine chose to confide in P.C. Chadbon, of all people.

It was a major step, keeping Aubrey Salkine awake and on edge for days before taking the plunge. Salkine had never stolen so much as a button, never cheated on his taxes, and deplored dishonesty. Then again, he'd been born and bred in that industriously criminal triangle of London bounded by Rosetta Street, Cap-a-Pie Lane, and Great Northern Avenue. More or less by definition, he could no more turn nark than fly across the Albert Canal dryshod by flapping his arms.

Somehow, unburdening himself to young Chadbon seemed to make it all right—hardly letting on to the law at all.

P.C. Chadbon was strolling to the Rosetta Street nick in plenty of time for his shift when Salkine fell into step beside him. Mr. Salkine was small and the only less-than-nondescript thing about him was his cleanliness: he always seemed not just scrubbed, but polished and varnished. Chadbon knew him by sight—they'd passed the time of day.

Now Mr. Salkine wanted to chat. Chadbon was a polite and diffident youth, providing the other party was unthreatening. He let Aubrey Salkine slow their leisurely pace to a halt on the high footpath overlooking that wasteland behind Great Northern Avenue known as The Meadows. No grass has grown nor stock grazed there for centuries. The last accommodating peasant lass was tumbled amid the dandelions and dock leaves in about 1750. These days it's an industrial estate. Not much of a view.

It put P.C. Chadbon in mind of a prisoner-of-war camp for machinery. A plant-hire firm had the nearest compound directly below, patient ranks of yellow bulldozers, graders, dump-trucks waiting behind the chain-link fence. Other compounds held up to a dozen warehouses, with light engineering factories punctuating the chessboard of fences and sheds. You rarely saw much in the way of people down there—just tractor-units unhitching containers or picking up new ones while forklift rigs trundled around.

Mr. Salkine set his elbows on the footpath's worn brick wall and jerked his chin at a compound in the middle distance, where the giant letters P and S soared above warehouses. "Pro Supplies," he explained. "Cash-and-carry to small traders. They've got wholesale outlets from the Kent coast to the far side of Reading and that's their main depot for the entire South of England."

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Chadbon sneaked a glance at his watch.

"Pro Supplies came to The Meadows last year," Salkine droned on. "Good for the area, plenty of unskilled and semi-skilled jobs on offer, and Lord knows we need the employment. Come to that, there are plenty of jobs still going there. They can't keep people on the night shifts. Because of the bad luck, the accidents."

He spat over the wall, neatly. "Funny thing about bad luck—some blokes are immune to it. There's one or two who have been on the night turn at Pro Supplies ever since it opened and never had a scratch. Others haven't been there a week before a crate crushes their toes or they fall awkward—broken-bones stuff."

"Sounds nasty," P.C. Chadbon observed. "Can't be good for the firm, neither." His father was middle-management in a wholesale dairy company. He knew about industrial accidents and their implications. "Pro Supplies' insurance premiums are going to look pretty sick when they come to renew the policy."

Mr. Salkine stared at him for a moment, not quite smiling. He spoke neutrally. "Oh, the firm's all right. These accidents don't get reported. Least said, soonest mended—ever hear that saying?"

"Rubbish," Chadbon retorted. Then he shut up, reminding himself it was Aubrey Salkine's story, obviously far from finished yet.

"Rubbish in theory, but not in your actual real world," the old boy pointed out drily. "I'm not one to make accusations. Let's say for argument's sake a lot of chaps working nights at Pro Supplies are drawing unemployment benefits all the while. Or earning a few bob extra, moonlighting there after finishing their daytime jobs what the taxman knows about. Right berks they'd be, making a fuss. You follow?"

Chadbon's blush showed that he did. He felt silly, and interested. Mr. Salkine sighed and shoved himself away from the wall, pottering along the path. "Better move or you'll be late clocking on. Yes, ill fortune is a very funny thing. Like this jinx at Pro Supplies. Only at night, and only some people. Heard of a sad case the other day. Kid gets a start there and, lumme, he breaks his leg before the week's out. Damn shame, because the boy's a footballer, got talent, what you might call a gifted youngster. He was on for a trial with 'Spurs, with the chance to make it as a pro. And now he won't be able to walk, much less run, for ever so long."

"Rotten luck," Chadbon agreed, sincerely. He jumped back several places in the conversation. "Who are these blokes who never have the bad luck, then?"

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Salkine stopped dead and stared reproachfully. "Bite your bloomin' tongue, son! We're having a nice talk about this and that, and you start taking liberties. Typical copper. There's some questions it happens to be bad manners to ask."

A hundred yards farther on, he began thinking aloud. "Nothing suspicious about Wally Breward having such good luck. He's been night-shift foreman at Pro Supplies from the day the depot opened. Stands to reason that Wally's experienced, safety-conscious. And his mate Ben Tricket reckons to be a real clever fellow—too intelligent to have accidents."

"Ah," P.C. Chadbon breathed. Salkine refused to meet his eye. Suddenly, for a law-abiding Briton who had done no more than his civic duty, Aubrey Salkine seemed depressed—annoyed with himself.

"Now I suppose you're satisfied," he snapped, "worming stuff out of me. I turn off here. Time I was getting home to my supper. And I never said nothing, mind!"

"I don't believe it," said Harry Rook, acting-skipper of C.I.D. at the Rosetta Street nick. P.C. Chadbon had taken a day to turn things over in his mind before sharing the gist of Mr. Salkine's friendly little chat. Detective Inspector Rook was irritable as soon as he learned the informant's identity.

Now, shoes on his desk, Rook drawled, "Old Aub turning grass? Never in a million years. Either you misunderstood his drift or he was winding you up."

Detective Sergeant Collins, filing papers the far side of the C.I.D. room, coughed warningly. He was a lizardlike man, the same width all the way up, with an oddly streamlined head, a wide lipless mouth, and very knowing eyes. When it came to Rosetta Street family trees, he was the acknowledged Herald of Arms. Understanding who fitted where, either side of the legitimacy blanket, was a hobby with Collins.

"So?" Inspector Rook demanded.

"It was just," Collins murmured, "that Quentin here mentioned a soccer player with a broken leg."

"Quentin?" Rook echoed derisively, staring at P.C. Chadbon, who reddened.

Undiverted, Sergeant Collins said, "Must be old Salkine's grandson, 'Spurs were supposed to be giving him a trial. He's in St. Asaph's in traction at the moment, poor little sod. Broke his heart missing

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that chance, never mind his leg. Enough to make a doting grampa turn spiteful. And chatty."

Inspector Rook jerked chin and thumb at P.C. Chadbon. "Okay, you've told us, now on your bike—you make the place look untidy."

Once the door shut, Rook raised his eyebrows. Sergeant Collins rattled off, "Wallace Breward, no form yet but he will have—bent as a chocolate watch. If it's not nailed down, then he thinks it belongs to him. A right dot on the card is Wally. Benjamin Tricket, big guy but his best muscle is between his ears. Does what Wally wants, it's a symbiotic relationship, one is useless without the other. Either they're ripping the firm off or running a protection racket on the rest of Pro Supplies' night shift."

Inspector Rook sighed, "Why not both at once while they're at it? Nice of Aub to draw our attention to that pair, but what in the world does the old fool expect me to do about it?"

Sergeant Collins took the point, but out of dislike for the other man treated the rhetorical question seriously. "Undercover operation? Borrow a new face from another manor, get him taken on the night shift there, and—"

"I know, I know," Rook broke in. "Easier said than done. And it's peanuts stuff—those bright sparks will go too far and do all the work for us on their own given time."

Collins said nothing, and his silences could be eloquent.

Inspector Rook pulled a face and grumbled, "Okay, I'll *think* about it."

The new man's name, or so he claimed, was Eric Wembry. There was something dodgy about him, Wally Breward decided from the off. For a start, Wembry was too strong for a little chap with soft hands and not much hair who wouldn't see forty again.

Then there was the way Wembry spoke. As if—hard to put a finger on it, but as if he was a posh talker trying to talk a bit rough. Lord Muck coming on as one of the lads.

"Go very easy on that one just for now," Wally instructed Ben Tricket. "He gives me the collywobbles. I don't know how to take him at all—he's a bit too deep for my taste and that's a fact."

When Aubrey Salkine described Ben Tricket as a clever fellow, he'd been using Rosetta Street irony, implying that the man was seriously stupid. In line with that, Ben glowered and rumbled, "You don't like the bastard, I'll whack him, sling him out, eh?"

"I just told you to lay off. Gawd, you can't get the staff these days."

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Wally, snide and slender, something of a clown, rolled his eyes and danced on the spot. "Really brill, that'd be—GBH on somebody who could be the law."

Nobody could be as dim as Ben Tricket, full time, but he did have flashes of shrewdness. "Never," he said. "Wembry wears specs and I heard him telling Ali he's worn them since he was a kid. You can't be a copper with duff eyes."

Wally blinked at his partner. "The things you come out with. Still, you're probably right."

"Probably nothing—he couldn't be a cop."

Wally looked more cheerful. "And he is a bit on the short side. All the same, lay off unless I give the word. Better safe than sorry."

So Eric Wembry got on with his work in peace. And there was quite a lot of it to get on with, since Breward was foreman and Ben Tricket evidently assumed that *he* was management, too. That left half a dozen teenagers, three downtrodden, mute Pakistanis, a couple of elderly men pathetically eager to mind their own business and avoid breaking sweat, and Eric Wembry. Who could handle a forklift truck, heft heavy crates without the aid of machinery, and, in the process, do more labor than any three of the others combined.

"Pocket bloody dynamo," Wally Breward smirked, watching Wembry getting on with it one evening. Wally had dismissed his earlier reservations. Wembry never raised his voice and rarely raised his eyes from the job in hand. What at first glance had looked to be light-colored jeans were heavily stained trousers from a go-to-the-office suit and he wore them night after night, despite a growing tally of minor rips. Down on his luck, Wally deduced, maybe done some time—disbarred doctor or lawyer? You wouldn't take him for an alky, but then again they could be very cunning and secretive.

After two weeks, Wally told the new chap, "Forget me own head next, I never collected your sub last payday. Never mind, I'll cover it—you only owe for this week. Just a fiver, nothing to a man of means like you, squire."

"Sub," Eric repeated doubtfully.

Wally winked at Ben Tricket. "Kee-rect. For the welfare fund. Your welfare."

Wembry's spectacles flashed as he nodded, reaching inside the ratty plastic-leather jerkin. Eyes bright, Wally spoke swiftly. "What's the matter with me tonight? Did I say a fiver? Slip of the tongue, it's ten—the sub is ten quid."

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"Bloody right it is," Ben Tricket confirmed. He sounded angry.

The money was handed over. "Security is good to have." Eric Wembry's voice was colorless. Wally looked at him sharply, but Wembry was moving away, returning to his stack of cartons.

"Yellow, soft as putty," Ben Tricket grumbled. "Should of gone for twenty, Wally. He's good for it, little squit."

Not only cowardly but weak in the head, it emerged. The PS crew took a nightly supper break, at which nasty sandwiches were exchanged for equally nasty yet novel ones, and eternal verities such as football and sex were discussed obsessively if listlessly. Eventually, Tricket noticed that Eric Wembry had taken to wandering away by himself.

Tricket prowled and snooped until he found the idiot at the far end of the compound where the chain-link fence ran alongside the Albert Canal. The water looked like polished jet in the merciless glare of perimeter lights from high-security compounds on the other bank.

Ben was choking with laughter when he reported later to Wally Breward. "Bloody fool asked me what the fishing's like in the Albert! Wants to know if you need a permit for angling!"

Wally snorted and corkscrewed an index finger beside his temple. "Catch a great case of toxic pollution there, for sure. Tell him it's just the job for swimming come the summer."

But then Mr. Holland took it into his head to spend a shift with the boys, something he'd done only once or twice since the depot opened.

Toward dawn, he beckoned Wally Breward to one side. "I thought we'd agreed to take your chum Tricket off checking months ago," he said. "Paperwork doesn't seem his forte somehow. He strikes me as a both-hands-on-the-pencil type."

There was an unspoken pact between Holland and Wally. Providing things ran smoothly, Holland would keep his big nose out of things and his backside in an armchair at home more often than not. It suited both of them, and everyone knows that a good deal must please both parties. But like many weak people, Holland was stubborn. He'd never liked the looks of Ben Tricket. "That ape needs coaching to count past five, it means switching hands. Put him on something else, with plenty of lifting and dirty work."

Wally said, "Fine by me, boss. Who d'you want in his place, though?" Given the night crew's caliber, it should have been stalemate. But Holland, gazing around, pointed at Wembry and replied,

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"Try that new feller with the glasses. He looks like he can read and write."

Told of his unpaid promotion, Wembry seemed first taken aback, then far from pleased. But he nodded and went back to his work. "Better find yourself a lot of ballpens," Mr. Holland teased. "Tricket will pass on his ceremonial clipboard." Wembry didn't respond, least of all with amusement. Holland concluded that the man was hard of hearing.

Ben Tricket was unmoved by the change. Wally had always taken care of the rudimentary paperwork, Ben supplying a set of formless signatures or initials. He hadn't been a checker and he'd be just as happy as a non-loader.

Very soon, however, Wally Breward was most unhappy.

Eric Wembry took his new duties seriously, in that he appeared to be shaving every day and took to donning a fairly clean warehouse coat hanging to his run-down heels on starting work. And within days, he broke new ground. He said no to Wally Breward.

Breward goggled at him, then tried again. "It's dead simple, cock. Just stick your monicker in that box on the form where I put the little tick."

"No," Wembry repeated. "That would mean I claimed five hundred frozen chickens went from here. Well, so they will in a way, but ten cases are on the wrong truck. That's a lot of chickens, Wally. A big shortfall for the firm not getting them."

"Do it," Breward snapped.

Eric stared at him. "Tell you what, *you* sign the consignment out."

Wally tried a different tack. "Look, you worry too much. All those Rentacops at the main gate want is a wave of the duplicate docket. They don't scan it."

To save overheads, Professional Supplies split the cost of private security guards with a daytime-only firm in the next compound. There was an outer gate controlling both company entrances and the uniformed security men stayed there. Being a round-the-clock operation, Professional Supplies saw no need for night watchmen.

"Then you sign the sheet," Wembry repeated. He put two fingers under Breward's elbow, urging him to walk along the loading-bay platform. There was a subtle change in Wembry. He still wasn't raising his voice or his eyes but somehow authority had begun seeping through.

"Wally," he said, "you're greedy. PS is an incredibly slackly run

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outfit, no argument. I imagine they aim to move far and fast, then sell out to some conglomerate. So they don't worry too much about pilferage. Any company makes allowances for theft, it's built into their figures. But what you've been at for the past month or two isn't just pilferage—it's what we business-efficiency experts call tearing the arse out of things. Keep on this way and Professional Supplies can't help but take notice. And what they'll do is fire everybody handling goods in this area and start with a fresh lot. Quick, clean, effective.

"Now me, I need this job—I even like it. Sign your own forms."

Before Wally could speak, Wembry added, "Have a tiny bit of sense. Don't stop thieving, just stop grabbing with both hands. Then you have a nice little earner for life."

Wally, trembling with shock and rage, started to bluster. "I'm not asking you to sign, I'm *tel—*"

Wembry, walking away, chose to hear only the opening remark and struck in, "Very sensible of you, too."

Wally waved frantically to Ben Tricket. Hardly bothering to lower his voice, he panted, "Do that little sod, Benny. Do him over good."

Besides the people involved, only Wally Breward and a boy called Kevin Costain witnessed the assault. Kevin was up on a gantry in one of the big sheds, trying to free a jammed cable, when he spotted Eric Wembry trundling along with his clipboard and Ben Tricket loping in pursuit. Or actually, he saw their shadows cast on the brick wall. And a sinister sight it was—a small shadow about to be engulfed by a towering, hulking one. And then—

To Wally Breward, Wembry appeared to lose his footing and skid on a greasy patch of floor just as Ben caught him. His arms flailed, but he stayed upright and it was Ben who went down. In fact, Eric had whirled at the last moment, kicking in a brutally educated manner so that his toe shattered Ben's kneecap as the steel clipboard impacted with Ben's upper lip, sharp edge leading.

Kevin Costain heard Wembry exclaim, almost boyishly, "You frightened the life out of me, Ben, creeping up that way!" A split second later, Tricket's screaming began and young Costain covered his ears. It put him in mind of a horse in distress—the same high, outraged, very loud noises.

Unruffled, Eric Wembry said, "Put a sock in it, old lad. Come on, upsa-daisy." Stepping in to help the fallen man, he managed to tread on Tricket's right hand and, unluckily, it happened to be resting on

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an uneven patch of floor. There was a sound like pencils being snapped and the screaming mutated into a bellow before resuming its old pattern.

It took a long time for the ambulance to arrive.

"I'm mortified," Eric assured Wally the following night. "Who'd imagine so much damage from a silly little mishap? Broken knee, something over twenty stitches in his face, and three broken fingers."

Breward muttered, "I know what you—what happened to him. He's my mate, I been at the hospital all day."

Wembry nodded casually. "I hope your mate explained it was an accident."

"He said he fell over, all right?"

Eric beamed at him. "That's what happened, so it must be all right."

Three nights later, pay night, Wembry was first to arrive at the PS compound. When Wally Breward turned up, Wembry said, "I wouldn't go asking the lads for money any more. Up to you, of course, but it might not be wise. Eleven against one, now that Ben's taken to his bed."

Wally's teeth stopped grinding long enough for him to spit, "Twelve to one—you forgot yerself. Can't even count!"

Wembly's spectacles flashed. "No, I'm neutral. But the others have been thinking. If I were you, I'd wind up the famous welfare fund, Wally. That way, they just might forget about demanding their refund and settle for not parting with any more."

"Anything else?" Wally gritted.

"Now that you mention it," Wembry said cordially. Wally flinched, just managing to catch the tossed clipboard after understanding he was not being attacked. "You do the checking for a while. You did it before—it's well within your grasp. I'm going to take it easy for a few nights, catch up on my beauty sleep."

Wally's jaw muscles knotted and the clipboard squeaked as he grasped it convulsively. Wembry spoke gently. "Get your sums right, Wally. Steal all you want, but softly—softly. Only one hand at a time. Because I'll know."

Detective Inspector Rook had been transferred to Hermitage, a sprightly, manicured, cut-glass London manor, and loved it. Such

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a delightful change from Rosetta Street, Great Northern Avenue, Cap-a-Pie Lane. But he kept in touch with local gossip—the Met Police, like any Cockney family, is compulsively interested in clan affairs.

Meeting Detective Sergeant Collins at a stag-night sendoff for a superintendent who was retiring rich and barely in time, Rook chortled, "I hear Ben Tricket had a nasty accident at work. One way of dealing with the matter, I suppose. So they did put a guy in undercover, after all, eh?"

He was offended—need-to-know and tight security is all very well, but surely not among comrades—when Collins looked blank, then murmured, "News to me if they did, sir. Anyway, like you said, it never amounted to much—pennies when we've got enough on our plates looking after the pounds."

Secretive git, Inspector Rook thought, grinning cheerily and slopping beer down the front of Collins' beautiful new slacks, accidentally on purpose.

Eric Wembry lied when he talked about getting beauty sleep at Professional Supplies. Mostly he sat in the frowsty cubicle that had been Wally Breward's office, reading. Wally and Ben had built an impressive library of porn magazines, so nobody was surprised.

Kevin Costain knew better, though. Kevin often saw Wembry on the night bus to work. Insofar as Wembry's muted personality allowed warmth, he was friendly to young Kevin. Kevin could read a bit, providing there were pictures above the captions. Writing brought him out in perspiration. He was very much in love with an Irish nurse at St. Asaph's and when she had to go back to Kerry to tend a terminally ill bachelor uncle, Kevin was despairing.

"I can't even phone her," he confided to Eric on the bus one night. "It's a farm with no phone there. I can write my name good, Eric, and her name, Pat, I can do that—" Kevin sniggered miserably "—it's the stuff in between. I'm scared she'll—well, what it is, she knows I can't write very well, but supposing she thinks I can't be bothered to try? That I don't really love her?"

Eric pursed his lips. "In India, places like that, they have letter-writers. Like newspaper sellers—you can find one on every busy street. That's what you need."

Suspecting a leg-pull, Kevin protested, "Ireland's too far for me, how could I get to India?"

Wembry laughed, his face changing momentarily, eyes dancing

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behind the thick, circular glasses. "Look, tell me what you want to say and I'll write your letters. We'll start tonight—no time like the present."

It didn't take long. Kevin told Patricia he missed her and he was doing the adult education classes like she wanted—"Well, I start next week and it might cheer her up, it's only a white lie, Eric"—and he hoped this found her as it left him. His block-capitals signature filled the rest of the page.

Eric found an old envelope and repaired it with sticky tape. Pat had given Kevin her address and Kevin had a stamp. "All done and dusted," Wembry said dismissively.

Kevin looked at the book on the desk. It was battered and old, iron mold spotting the page edges like the mottling on elderly hands. "Good book, Eric?"

"Very boring, as a matter of fact. Also very interesting. A history of this district by a Victorian clergyman. I found it at a jumble sale years ago. Did you know where we are now, The Meadows, was going to be one of the pioneer charity housing projects for working people? But before the first set of flats could go up—they called them 'apartments for the clean poor' in the eighteen forties—the Bishop's chaplain did a runner with the money and it never happened."

"Dead boring," Kevin agreed fervently.

"Well, yes and no. I've always had this sneaking fondness for secret passages—it's the romantic in me," Wembry admitted.

Out of his depth since the conversation began, Kevin mumbled, "I'd better be getting back to work."

"Me, too," Wembry agreed. But obviously he changed his mind, for when Kevin glanced back from the doorway he had his nose in that crummy book.

"Two million quid," Superintendent Greatrex mourned. "Two million and counting," he amended sourly. "They're still figuring out exactly what has gone, but two million minimum. Which will make our crime figures look—obscene."

Sergeant Collins tried to console him. "At least we've got Wallace Breward." The new Inner City Task Force was handling the theft of platinum from the vault of a factory at The Meadows industrial estate. Strictly speaking, it was none of the superintendent's business, but it had happened on his patch and he felt the ignominy.

"Breward," he scoffed. "Found unconscious, knocked silly, at Pro Supplies. Which is next but one compound to the factory with the

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platinum." He held up a finger and indicated its final joint. "A bit of platinum scrap no longer than that was snagged behind the lapel of his jacket."

"So he'll go down."

"Big deal. That three-quidsworth of platinum linking him to the tickle is all that will be recovered. Breward's whining he knows nothing, it was all that evil Eric Wembry." Superintendent Greatrex couldn't tear his hair, there was so little to grab. "Of *course* it was 'Eric Wembry.' Our old pal Spud Embry's little joke, giving those hard-charging Task Force twits a warm body to keep 'em amused while he has it away on his toes with a not-so-small fortune. Exit laughing."

Glaring up at Collins, he demanded, "How could Spud Embry be on our patch for month after bleeding month and nobody the wiser? You can tell I've been away! I should have brought the pack of you white sticks and a few of those trained Labradors, make you stop at the curb till the light goes green."

"Have a heart, skipper. Spud Embry, or Wembry as he called himself to get that job at Professional Supplies, hasn't been a dot on the card since God was a boy. Target villain in his time, but that was when? Fifteen years back, before he bought that bar in Spain.

"What's more, he was working nights, keeping his head down during the day. The few of us who might have clocked his face had no reason to go out to The Meadows and—" Sergeant Collins stopped himself. He wanted time to ponder, so he stalled. "Could be Wally Breward *was* in it with Embry, sir. Spud couldn't lift that stuff on his ownsome—dig a tunnel half a mile long to get in under the vault floor."

Superintendent Greatrex laughed joylessly. "Don't you believe it. Economy of effort is a Spud Embry trademark. The industrial estate may be recent, but beneath the entire site is a network of Victorian sewerage and storm-water drainage systems from some aborted building scheme. Embry got into the sewers in a couple of nights, from a workshop at Pro Supplies, and took the shortcut to the vault. Then up he goes, thermic lance through the vault floor.

"*He* knew about the sewers network, they didn't. The firm bought a factory off the shelf, as it were, in 1982, spanking new—put the vault in on the ground floor for their high-value materials, and thought it was safe. Embry cracks it, dances around the interior alarms and sensors, and spends hours removing the platinum. It

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wouldn't have been discovered until after the weekend, I hear, except rats came up from the sewers after he left and triggered the sensors.

"Anyway, Admiral Spud surfaces back in Pro Supplies and loads the stuff aboard one of those inflatable boats. The frogmen found the remains of it two miles away, sunk in the Albert Canal alongside a public car park that's deserted at night. End of story. Knowing Spud, he had the stuff sold before he even got the job at PS."

Greatrex paused for breath. Sergeant Collins, deciding that he really disliked Inspector Rook, remarked, "Ironic, really, sir. We could have had a bloke around Pro Supplies, having a sniff at something else entirely. But Mr. Rook decided against it. It's in my book for that month, if you want the exact date. Wouldn't have helped Embry, to say the least."

"Ah," said Superintendent Greatrex. Every cloud has a—well, platinum lining. *He* did not dislike Rook. He detested the fellow. "Fetch that book and tell me more."

As Sergeant Collins turned to obey, Greatrex said, "What's the joke?"

Collins said, "Just a thought, sir. I wanted an undercover man in there—recommended it. And there was one. For the wrong side."

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If she was to be believed, Julien would live another forty-three years, Louis another thirty, and Henry was fated to pass from the earth seventeen years hence, on the tenth of November . . .

HENRY RENSON'S FORTUNE

by SIGRID NUNEZ

Toward the end of the last century, the scion of a wealthy New York family was struck with wanderlust and the desire to see exotic places. His parents, long in the habit of indulging their son's whims, promptly sent him to the Near East.

Henry Renson crossed the Atlantic in a stateroom furnished with a canopied bed and a grand piano. For most of the voyage he was seasick, which might have spoiled his fun had he been having any. But in fact Henry was already bored. This was not unexpected. What had begun as an affectation a few years before was now a fixed frame of mind. Nothing could keep Henry amused for long, and this voyage out was no exception. First of all, ocean travel held no novelty for him—he had been to Europe many times. It is true that, because of his destination, he had felt more than the usual excitement this time—for example, while he and his manservant were packing his trunks, and at the bon voyage party his friends had given him the night before he sailed. But when he was actually standing on deck, waving his hat at his parents who had come to the pier to see him off, he sighed an all-too-familiar sigh, as if his adventure were already done and had turned out to be disappointing.

Time passed slowly and he continued to mope, finding much to displease him: the flat, unbroken view of sky and sea, the stuffiness of his cabin, the chef's penchant for velouté sauces, which aggravated Henry's nausea. Even more tedious was the obligation to mingle with the other first-class passengers, several of whom he knew from society and none of whom he liked.

The ship sailed into the Mediterranean and docked at Marseilles, where, one day later, Henry boarded a steamer bound for North Africa. Among the new passengers were two Frenchmen—

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cousins—with whom Henry immediately hit it off. Louis and Julien Reynaud spoke little English, but luckily Henry's French was good. The cousins explained that they were on a grand shopping expedition for a rich and acquisitive nobleman who had engaged them to seek out fine Eastern wares, from mosaics and carpets to Arabian horses. They insisted, though, that this mission would in no way prevent them from enjoying themselves to the hilt. Henry was immensely cheered by the company of these two men. He was particularly charmed by Julien's laugh, which sounded as if he had a whistle in his throat. When the Reynauds invited him to travel with them, he accepted.

Together they toured Egypt, Palestine, and Mesopotamia—and for every monument or mosque they visited, they visited two brothels. Under the cousins' guidance, Henry's trip became one long pleasure cruise. At every hotel or inn they stopped, they were treated like pashas. They ate exquisite meals prepared with strong spices and drank quantities of raki and wine. Whole afternoons they idled away in the Turkish baths. Henry, who tended to be reserved even with friends, found it easy to let his hair down with the Reynauds—no doubt because he expected never to see them again.

It was in Baghdad that the men let themselves be persuaded by their dragoman to consult a certain fortuneteller who lived at the edge of the city. The dragoman led them through the curving streets to a shanty made of dried mud and palm branches. They would not need him to translate, he explained, since the fortuneteller, a woman, knew French. Her *bonjour* was delivered in so disgruntled a tone Henry suspected they must have woken her. Above her veil her black eyes narrowed sullenly. A skeleton of a boy with the same narrow black eyes peered from behind her.

Kneeling on the mat that covered the dirt floor, the woman motioned to the men to join her. Henry did so with a cringe of distaste. The hovel was typical of the misery he had got used to seeing in this part of the world. And, given this, the woman's behavior seemed to him inexplicable. She accepted the coins the men gave her almost grudgingly, as if she had no need of money and resented their having disturbed her.

In barely comprehensible French, she announced that she would answer only one question apiece, so they had better make their questions good. Then she snapped her fingers at the boy, who silently fetched her a small earthenware jar. The woman turned the jar upside down and shook out its contents: a mixture of dried leaves,

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sand, and bits of colored glass. At this, Henry could not help shaking his head. From the moment they arrived, he had been filled with pity for this poor woman and her starving child. Now that feeling redoubled and was laced with contempt. What a benighted people! Imagining the future in a handful of carpet sweepings!

All her languor suddenly gone, the woman hunched over the scattered contents of the jar in an attitude of fierce concentration.

The men shifted uncomfortably. At last Julien broke the silence with his tweedling laugh and, winking at his companions, remarked that of course the most important question would be when each of them was going to die.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the fortuneteller responded. If she was to be believed, Julien would live another forty-three years, Louis another thirty, and Henry Renson was fated to pass from the earth seventeen years hence, on the tenth of November.

The men looked at one another, speechless. Sitting back on her heels, the woman muttered that if they wanted to know anything else they would have to pay more. But the men had had enough. They left the fortuneteller's with the unpleasant sense of having been cheated. After all, they had come here solely to be entertained, and there was nothing at all entertaining about this surly woman and her little rubbish heap.

Outside, they playfully scolded the waiting dragoman for having led them astray and suggested he make amends by taking them at once to the whores' district.

Not long after this, the travelers parted. The Frenchmen headed south to Arabia in search of horses, and Henry, his wanderlust sated and his old devil boredom beginning to prick him again, sailed home.

Back in New York, Henry immediately fell ill with a fever. For several days he was delirious, his head swimming with sights and sounds from his recent trip: minarets against turquoise skies, arabesques, turbans and veils, the undulating necks of the camels, the dark breasts of the whores, the pandemonium of the bazaars, snatches of Arabic and French, and through it all, like a fanfare sounded at regular intervals, Julien's piercing laugh.

When he came to himself, Henry learned from his mother that in his delirium he had assured her that he would not die, because the woman said it wasn't time. What woman? Mrs. Renson demanded. Henry smiled knowingly but refused to explain. Although he was

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not superstitious, a vague misgiving kept him from repeating the fortuneteller's prediction.

His health restored, Henry went out again into society and soon met a woman of heart-swelling beauty, to whom he proposed. Because Sophia was so beautiful, and because he really loved her, Henry blinded himself to the truth: that she had married him only for his money, and that her frequent visits to this or that ailing friend were in fact trysts with this or that lover.

Once married, Henry found his desire to travel—or to go out at all—much diminished. He would have preferred to spend every evening at home with his wife. Sophia, however, felt quite the opposite. She had a large circle of friends, never tired at balls, and would have gone gladly every night to the theater. But she wouldn't have dreamed of making her husband suffer: she insisted that he stay at home as he wished and let her go out by herself.

Often Sophia would come in late, to find Henry, who had waited up for her, dozing in his armchair. And, in spite of his plea that she wake him when she came home, she would go to bed alone. "You looked so cozy, I just didn't have the heart," she'd explain the next morning as she combed out her lustrous blonde hair.

Time passed, and in due course came the year that Henry had been told he would die.

He had never believed that woman, and he still did not. Nevertheless, as the year progressed, Henry, who had gone for long periods without remembering the fortuneteller's prediction, found himself thinking of it all the time. And as a consequence, he found himself thinking all the time about death, which made him by turns anxious and despondent.

As November neared, he felt an ever-increasing need to unburden himself. But to whom? By now he had buried both his parents, and the reclusive life he had led since his marriage had isolated him from his old cronies. Sophia—youthful, fun-loving Sophia—would not have understood. Henry had never told her about the fortuneteller, but he could guess how she'd respond. Unlike him, Sophia was deeply superstitious. In Rome, on their honeymoon, they had let a gypsy read their palms, and Henry remembered how his wife had hung on every word the silly old woman said. When the thirteenth fell on a Friday, Sophia was too nervous even to get out of bed. And recently she had thrown a fit when she found the cook feeding scraps to a black cat that had come to the kitchen door.

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Finally Henry turned to his minister, who happened to be an old family friend.

Reverend Porter assured Henry that the fortuneteller could not possibly know when Henry was going to die. But, he reminded: the Lord works in strange ways. Perhaps this was His means of getting Henry to do a little soul-searching. Perhaps He had intended for Henry to reflect on his mortality and on his sins and how he must answer for them in the life to come. Reverend Porter urged Henry not to shrink from such sober thoughts but to give himself wholly up to them.

This counsel reduced Henry to despair. When he thought about his death, he had only one response: he did not want it to happen. Even at his most wretched, he had never wished his days were done. When he looked back and saw how most of his life had been spent in idleness and pleasure, he thought only how sad that such an agreeable existence must end. As for the life to come, how could he bear to think of it at all, when the words of the Lord kept recurring to him: sooner the camel through the needle's eye than the rich man through the gates of heaven?

To add to his woe, Sophia was hardly ever at home now. Her excuse was the grave illness of her sister, whom Henry himself had seen tooling down Fifth Avenue in a roadster, a young man at her side and the bloom of unmistakable health on her cheek. When he confronted his wife and accused her of lying to him, Sophia was indignant. Had he never heard that a little airing is good for the convalescent? A nice spin just happened to be what the doctor had ordered. After this quarrel, Sophia would not speak to Henry for days.

And so matters stood on the tenth of November, to which Henry woke with a sense of foreboding.

Sophia had her usual full day: dressmaker, hairdresser, and of course the obligatory sick visit. She set out soon after breakfast, leaving Henry alone.

When the maid came to clear away the breakfast things, she remarked to herself that Mr. Renson looked peaked. Later, when she brought him his lunch, she found him sunk in his chair, staring at his hands. At two o'clock, though he had hardly eaten, he sent a message to the cook that he would not want dinner.

That day Henry never left his room. He tried to lose himself in one of the travel books with which he had long been content to replace the real thing, but he could not concentrate. On the mahog-

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any table beside the bed stood a handsome bronze-and-marble clock—a wedding present from his favorite aunt. Every hour it chimed, setting off the same melancholy chain of thoughts: What if he really were to die today? What would his forty-two years have been? He had had every advantage and what had he achieved? Though it was his greatest wish, he could not even please his wife. Were he to die today, what difference would it make? Life would close after him like the waters over the head of a drowned man, and he would be forgotten. It would be as though he had never been.

It was nearly midnight when Sophia came in. Henry lay in bed, exhausted from the emotions of the day. At the sight of his wife, so lovely in a simple black dress with lace cuffs, her newly waved hair softening her face, Henry's eyes filled with tears. He held out his hands to her.

"Henry, what is it?" Sophia gasped, hastening to his side. Henry blinked rapidly and attempted to smile. But it was useless: he could hold his grief back no longer. In a broken voice, he told her everything.

Sophia listened, her jaw lax in disbelief. She looked at the clock. Her hand flew to her throat. "You mean—can it be? In a few minutes, you could be—?"

Ashamed, and touched by her fear, Henry tried to reassure her. But Sophia was beside herself. "Oh, my darling," she cried. And, throwing herself across his chest, she began to kiss him.

Astonished, Henry took her in his arms. A delectable warmth pervaded him. So she loved him after all! The thought of his death destroyed her! To know this, to have her embrace him so passionately, made all his suffering worthwhile. And in the full joy of that moment, Henry actually longed for death: for if I were to die right now, he told himself, I would die a happy man.

The clock chimed: twelve soft chimes, each one sweeter to Henry's ears than the last. He tightened his arms about his wife.

But Sophia twisted from his grasp. She sprang off the bed. She stared from Henry to the clock and back again, and though she clearly tried, she could not disguise what she felt. She trembled and flushed like someone who has just been made a fool of. Sophia—superstitious, false Sophia—had dared to believe the fortuneteller. In the little time that remained of that day, she had dared to hope Henry might die. And now she could not hide her disappointment. His death would have left her a millionairess and free. Free to—

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In a flash, Henry was on her, squeezing his thumbs into her throat—a pressure that would later appear as two livid marks, convincing the jurors that what happened next was self-defense.

Groping along the mahogany table, Sophia seized the bronze-and-marble clock and struck Henry on the head.

Detective Campbell, called to the scene of the murder, brought along his young protege, Tom Quin. This would be the first murder scene Tom had ever observed. On the way to the Rensons', Detective Campbell ordered him to pay close attention. "Remember, this is part of your training. Don't touch anything or get in the way, but keep your eyes sharp. I want you to notice everything. No matter how piddling a detail might seem, it could turn out to be a big clue."

There were already several policemen waiting at the Rensons' brownstone when the two men arrived. They stayed about an hour, listening to Mrs. Renson's sobbed explanation, interviewing the servants, and inspecting the body before the wagon came to take it to the morgue. Detective Campbell wrapped the blood-stained clock in his handkerchief and dropped it into a cloth drawstring bag.

On the ride back to the police station, Campbell gave his opinion that the crime had happened just as Mrs. Renson had said. In a fit of jealousy, her husband had tried to strangle her and she had stopped him with a single blow to the head. Then he turned to Tom and asked him what he had observed.

"That Mrs. Renson is very beautiful," Tom said with a blush.

The detective chuckled. "I'll say. What else?"

"Well, I don't see how this could be important, but I did notice it."

"What?"

Tom hesitated, evidently afraid of saying something stupid. Then, indicating the bag in the detective's lap, he said, "The murder weapon."

"Yes?"

"It's a few minutes fast."

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a *NEW* Rand story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"What are you going to do now?" Rand asked.

"Nothing," Hastings admitted with a shrug. "We can't even announce how the man died without acknowledging we were tapping the phone line of a friendly embassy."

"It might not have been Youder. A good many other people must know of the technique."

"Youder knows how we work. He knows our weak spots."

Rand said, "I have a feeling you're not telling me everything, Hastings . . ."

THE SPY AND THE EMBASSY MURDERS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Graham Youder was an expert at killing people.

When he was introduced that way at top-secret conclaves of British Intelligence, he had a habit of dipping his head shyly and explaining that he had never, of course, actually killed anyone personally. He merely thought up methods, rather like that fellow in Ian Fleming's books who dreamed up the exotic weaponry for James Bond. That always brought a chuckle from the other men gathered around the table, and any apprehension they might have felt toward this quiet little man quickly evaporated.

Anyone familiar with his highly classified personnel file, however, would have little cause for feeling completely at ease in Graham Youder's company. He was credited, among other things, with having invented the poison-gas cigarette, one in which slivers of Teflon were mixed with the tobacco. When the cigarette was lit, the burning

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Teflon gave off deadly methane gas. Some said he also invented the exploding telephone. The victim could be called from anywhere in the world, and when you were certain your man or woman was on the line you transmitted an electronic signal that detonated a small explosive charge previously hidden in the telephone receiver.

Rand had never been a particular friend of Youder's during the decade or so he'd headed the Department of Concealed Communications. Espionage work for him involved the breaking of codes, the solving of enigmas constantly created by the other side. If people sometimes died in the course of his investigations, it was generally because of circumstances beyond his control. The idea of setting out deliberately to kill anyone, even an enemy agent, was something he found repugnant. He knew there were those who disagreed with him. Otherwise men like Graham Youder would not be employed.

Rand still managed to stop into his old office about twice a year, even when Hastings, his former chief, had not summoned him out of retirement for some special task. On this cool but sunny May morning, shortly before noon, Rand never got as far as the upper floor where his office had been. Crossing the vast marble lobby toward the elevator, having passed through the standard security check, he suddenly found himself face to face with Hastings, who was on his way out of the building.

"Rand! What are you doing here?"

"I came up to London to buy a new suit and thought I'd stop by to say hello."

"Come with me," Hastings ordered. "I need you."

"What is it?"

"You'll see."

Hastings was silent and grim-faced in the brief ride up St. James's Street and through Mayfair to Grosvenor Place. The official car stopped before a three-story red-brick building in the middle of the block. "What's in here?" Rand asked, no longer expecting an answer.

The building had several flats, and they walked through the first floor to a door at the rear where a brisk young man in a black raincoat seemed to be waiting for them. "In here, sir."

Hastings nodded. "Quinlin, this is Rand. He used to be with us. Before your time."

"Yes, sir," the red-haired man replied.

Rand cast a quick eye around the flat. It was unfurnished except for a folding cot, a card table, and a chair. On the card table was a

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tape recorder. A dead man seated on the chair had his head thrown back as if gazing at the ceiling.

Rand gasped. "What's that on his ears?"

Hastings sniffed. The odor of melted plastic and ozone was strong in the room. "They were earphones once," he said grimly. "We were tapping into a line here. What does it look like, Quinlin? Five thousand volts?"

"At least, sir," Quinlin agreed.

"Someone *killed* him like this?" Rand asked, still not quite comprehending. "Someone sent high voltage through that telephone wire strong enough to fuse the earphones to his ears? Who the hell would even think of something like that?"

Hastings turned to face him. "Do you remember a man named Graham Youder?"

They were back at Hastings' office by early afternoon. It was high tide on the Thames and Rand could see the tour boats bobbing against the pier. He felt suddenly tired. "Tell me something, Hastings," he said. "Were you bugging the American Embassy?"

"Certainly not."

Rand tried to think what else was in the area. There was only one likely possibility. "The Irish Embassy, then."

Hastings said nothing.

"Tell me about Graham Youder."

"You knew him in the old days. He was always a strange little man. Frankly, it gave me the chills to have him around. How a human mind could devise some of the things he came up with—"

"Where is he now?"

"He retired about a year ago and seems to have dropped from sight."

"What made you think of him today?"

"That business we saw was something he suggested once. He worked it all out and gave me a detailed memo on it. Of course, we never used it. If you suspect a telephone line is being tapped, you can blow away the tapper and his equipment by sending a five-thousand-volt charge through the line. At the instant of the voltage surge, the phone line has to be disconnected at both ends, from the telephone and from the rest of the phone system, so that you don't melt your own phone or disrupt the rest of the phone system. But that's easy enough to do, and to repair afterwards."

"What sort of equipment would you need for this?"

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"Something called an insulation tester. It's standard equipment with phone companies."

"What are you going to do now?" Rand asked.

"Nothing," Hastings admitted with a shrug. "We can't even announce how the man died without acknowledging we were tapping the phone line of a friendly embassy."

"It might not have been Youder. A good many other people must know of the technique."

"Youder knows how we work. He knows our weak spots."

"I have a feeling you're not telling me everything, Hastings."

The older man took his turn at the window, and the sunlight glistened off the silver in his hair. Odd, in a way, that Rand had been the one to retire early while Hastings stayed on into his sixties. "There are certain things I'm not at liberty to divulge," he said. "After all, you're no longer one of us."

"Then why did you take me along to see the body?"

"All right, I was hoping you could help. You knew Youder once and I was hoping you could locate him for us."

"You must know I was never on friendly terms with the man. Besides, if you took me along you must have had reason to suspect Youder even before you saw the scene. This isn't the first killing, is it?"

"There was one other," Hastings admitted. "About a fortnight ago, one of our people died of inhaling methane gas from a poisoned cigarette. Remember Youder's old trick with the slivers of Teflon?"

"Even two such killings could be a coincidence. A man who's given a lifetime to his government doesn't just turn against them for no reason."

"There was a reason of sorts," Hastings told him. "At least to a deranged mind it might seem like a reason. Do you remember Cynthia Blandish?"

"Of course. She was one of the young women in the decoding section, back in the days before high-speed computers. Whatever happened to her?"

"In the late Seventies, a great many of the code clerks had to be reassigned to other departments for exactly the reason you mention. They were replaced by computers. Cynthia was given the position of secretary to Graham Youder."

"I see."

Hastings paced. "You don't see it all yet. Youder got her pregnant."

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Rand was surprised. "Perhaps he's not as complicated a man as I thought."

"He denied the entire business, of course, but we finally had to let him go. His work was suffering and the place was in a turmoil. I offered to find him a position in the admiralty office but he chose to retire."

"How long ago was that?"

Hastings went to his desk and punched up the record on his computer terminal. "June thirtieth. Almost eleven months."

"What about Cynthia?"

"She took a leave of absence to have her child and we haven't seen her again. She decided not to come back."

"Would you like me to go talk to her? Youder might have come to see his child."

"That's a possibility, I suppose."

"I'll want the names of our people who died, including the one today."

"See Quinlin—he's right down the hall. He can give you Cynthia's address, too. And thank you, Rand."

Quinlin worked in one of the glassed-off cubicles that had been carved out of the old decoding room. Rand barely recognized the place and he began to anticipate a time when his visits would grow even less frequent. He told the young man what he wanted and then waited while Quinlin delivered the items in meticulous fashion.

"Here's the address of Cynthia Blandish and her son. She has a flat in Southwark. What else did you want, sir?"

"The names of the two men who died. Hastings said there was one a couple of weeks ago. Something about a poisoned cigarette."

"That would be Willoby, sir. Nigel Willoby, a contract employee we use sometimes. He was acting as a chauffeur at an evening reception at the French Embassy over at Rutland Gate. Sometimes we pick up bits of gossip from the other drivers that way. Apparently someone gave him a poisoned cigarette. He was found dead inside his closed limousine."

"And the man today?"

"Henry Sover. Been with us about two years."

"Known to Youder?"

"Oh, certainly. Youder would have had contact with both victims at some time. He used them on occasion."

"Were you with Sover when he was electrocuted?"

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Quinlin shook his head. "I went by to collect the most recent tape and found him like that. Then I telephoned Hastings."

Rand nodded. "What's your impression of Graham Youder, Quinlin?"

The young man frowned, as if trying to remember. Or perhaps he was simply weighing his response. "Intelligent, a bit aloof—at least from me. It was quite a shock to learn about Cynthia and him."

"Do you think he could have killed those two men?"

"No. I don't see how any of our people could have done it."

Rand didn't argue. At that age, he remembered, he'd still had some ideals left, too.

Southwark is a section of London across the Thames from St. Paul's Cathedral, remembered as an area of rowdy theater-going in Shakespeare's time and as the place from which the pilgrims started in *The Canterbury Tales*. The area was a slum in Victorian times and the street Rand sought hadn't improved a great deal in a hundred years. Cynthia Blandish's flat was at the top of a five-story walkup. She answered the door on his second knock.

"Oh! It's Mr. Rand, isn't it?"

"Hello, Cynthia. May I come in?"

"The place is a mess. I wasn't expecting visitors." She still looked much as he remembered her, with bleached hair and a shy way of smiling. She'd be in her late thirties, he estimated. Her figure was still good, accentuated by the tight sweater and paint-stained jeans she wore.

"I hope I'm not intruding," Rand murmured, choosing a worn armchair close to the door. Across the room, he could see a baby sleeping in a playpen. "I heard you were a mother now."

"That's Ted," she acknowledged with a smile. "I had him last August, shortly after I stopped working."

"Will you go back?"

"No. They don't care about me. Hastings never even inquired about the baby. I could certainly use the money, though. I had to give up my nice flat in Lambeth."

"Doesn't the father pay for his child's support?"

"Not nearly enough." The smile faded for a moment. "But what brings you here to see me? I saw you once at the office last year, while I was still working, but you were gone before I could say hello."

"I try to stay as retired as possible, but once in a while Hastings

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drags me in for something. He said you were Graham Youder's secretary before you retired."

"Yes, I was. I'm thankful they found something for me. It's the computers, you know. We've all been replaced by computers. They'd laugh now if they ever saw you at your blackboard."

"How was Graham to work for? Not a fun-loving sort, was he?"

Her eyes seemed to study him for an instant. "Like any other employer, I expect. Not as nice as you."

"Thank you," Rand said and felt himself blush. "Did he leave the same time as you?"

"Yes."

"Actually, that's why I came to see you."

"What, about Graham Youder?" Suddenly there was a trace of anger in her voice. "I should have known you didn't really come to see me. No one ever phoned from the day I left. They don't even know I had my baby."

"They gave me your address."

"I sent them a change-of-address card when I moved so they could forward any mail."

"Did Youder ever speak to you about his family?"

"He had no family. He was the world's original loner."

"You speak of him in the past tense."

The baby woke up and started to cry. Cynthia hurried across the room to pick him up. "Youder's in the past tense for me. Ted's my present now. And my future."

Rand watched as the infant clutched at his finger. "Hello, Ted."

"He's standing already. He'll be walking soon."

"There were two other people I wanted to ask you about—Henry Sover and Nigel Willoby. Did you know them?"

"They work for the department. Sover is one of the regulars and Willoby does contract work when he's needed. Or at least that was true a year ago. I can't speak for now."

"You're very open about it."

She shrugged. "You're one of us, Mr. Rand. I wouldn't be telling this to some journalist off the street." She cradled the baby as she spoke, soothing his ginger hair. "I had to sign that paper, same as you. The Official Secrets Act." Her tone was almost ironic.

"You came in contact with Sover and Willoby because they did work for Graham Youder?"

"That's right. Why this sudden interest in Graham?"

Rand decided to tell her. "Willoby and Sover are both dead, killed

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within the past couple of weeks. The methods used were ones suggested by Youder for counter-intelligence work. Hastings thinks he's responsible."

"Why would he start killing his former colleagues?"

"Who knows? Bitterness over his dismissal, perhaps?"

"Leaving the government was his choice. Hastings offered him another position—in the Admiralty, I think. But intelligence work had been his life."

"We have to find him, Cynthia," Rand said softly. "You must know where he is."

"I don't."

"Hasn't he ever come by to see his son?"

She looked up, startled. "Whoever said Graham was Ted's father?"

"I understand there was talk around the office—"

"I worked for Graham Youder. I admired his skill at the job. But he was a cold, distant person—a loner, like I said. I don't believe he could ever love a woman."

"You mean he's homosexual?"

"No. I don't believe he could ever love anyone but himself. And he's a dangerous man, Mr. Rand. I don't say he killed those two, but he could have." She glanced at the clock. "I'll have to ask you to leave now. It's time for Ted's feeding."

"Certainly." He took a five-pound note from his wallet and handed it to her. "Buy something nice for him, will you?"

"Thank you," she said. At the door, she added, "Be careful, Mr. Rand. Don't let them use you."

"How would they use me?"

"To flush out Graham. You're retired, expendable."

Going down the stairs to the street, Rand reflected that Cynthia Blandish had always been an intelligent young woman.

The following day, over Leila's objections, Rand took an early train back into London. From Paddington Station, he set off on a brisk walk to Bayswater Road and the Marble Arch, cutting through the side streets until he reached Grosvenor Square. He passed the American Embassy and headed farther along until he came to the Irish one. He had a friend there he hoped could be of assistance.

It had been more than a year since he'd last seen Ambrose McSweeney, but the stout Irishman was as cordial as ever. He ushered Rand into his second-floor office and asked, "Now, what can I

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do for you today? You didn't come to see old McSweeney just to comment on the spring weather."

"Do you still handle security here, Ambrose?"

"That and about five other jobs. We're undermanned, always have been."

"How do you handle telephone security? Do you have regular sweeps for bugs?"

"We employ an outside firm. Crown Security Services."

"I'm not familiar with them—but then I've been out of the business a good many years."

"Crown is less than a year old, I believe. They do work for a number of the embassies. Not the Russians, of course. They handle their own, as do the Americans."

"Who do you deal with at Crown?"

"A chap named Rodgers. Seems to know his business." McSweeney stepped to a filing cabinet and brought out an illustrated brochure. "Here's all about them."

Rand scanned the pages for Youder's name but it wasn't there. The list of clients, however, did include both the Irish and French embassies. "May I take this?"

"I'll run off a copy for you. Thinking of giving them some business?"

"I might. Are you satisfied with their work?"

"We haven't had any security breaches I'm aware of."

"When was their last sweep of the place?"

"I believe they've just completed one. Nothing unusual was found."

Rand wondered if a British telephone tap would be considered unusual or not.

Hastings was interested in what Rand had to report. "I know a great many embassies are using Crown Security," he said, lighting his pipe, "though I doubt if they've any connection with the deaths."

"Henry Sover's electrocution could have been an accident, you know. A person manning a telephone tap doesn't have the earphones on all the time. He might simply have been unlucky enough to be listening when the Crown people swept the line with high voltage."

Hastings stared at him silently for a moment. "Then what about Willoby at the French Embassy?"

"They both did work for Youder, didn't they?"

"On occasion."

"Who else worked with him?"

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Hastings took a puff on his pipe, perhaps pondering how open he could be with Rand. "Well, everyone in MI5 might have had contact. There are times when a certain specialty is needed."

"Did Youder ever do embassy break-ins, bugging?"

"Not personally, no."

"But he used those two on occasion?"

"He might have. I'd have to check the files."

He was gone for about ten minutes, leaving Rand to stare out at the river once more. When he returned, he carried a slim folder. "It seems Youder occasionally used something he called the Thin Group, consisting of department people and contract employees. Willoby and Sover were both members of Thin."

"Sover didn't seem too thin when I saw him."

"It was a code name. You know how those things are. One of the other members was a man named Isaac Rodgers."

"Rodgers?"

"I understand he works for Crown Security now."

"Of course!" It could be the link he was looking for. "Thank you, Hastings. I'll pay a call on Mr. Rodgers."

"I didn't mean to involve you in this so deeply, Rand. If it is Youder that's behind it, he could be dangerous."

"I know."

He was at the main office of Crown Security less than an hour later. It was a small place overlooking Berkeley Square, not far from several embassies. A young woman in the office told him that Isaac Rodgers was out ill that day. After some effort Rand obtained his home address in Bloomsbury.

As he pulled up to the block of flats, he saw an ambulance standing before one building. He parked across the street, his heart beating faster, and hurried over.

A woman was sobbing by the door as the ambulance crew maneuvered their burden down the steps. "I'm looking for Isaac Rodgers," Rand said.

She lifted her tear-filled eyes to him. "That's my husband. He's dead! He was sick last night and now he's dead!"

Rand followed the ambulance attendants to the curb. "We have to get him to the hospital," one of them told him. "There might be life. It's faint, but—"

"Which hospital?"

"St. Martin's is closest."

By the time Rand arrived there, Isaac Rodgers had been pro-

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nounced dead. His wife arrived in the company of a neighbor. "I knew he was dead," she told Rand. "He complained of stomach pains last night and they were worse this morning. I begged him to see a doctor."

"Did you see anyone or have any visitors last evening?"

"Are you from his office?"

"I just came from there," Rand answered truthfully.

"The only visitor was that Mr. Youder. He came around eight o'clock and they had a drink together in the den."

Rand nodded. "Graham Youder. Did he work with your husband, Mrs. Rodgers?"

"Sometimes. It had to do with guarding embassies."

"And after Mr. Youder left, your husband experienced stomach pains?"

"That's right. He had to call in sick this morning. But I suppose you know that. He was only forty-nine." She pressed a handkerchief to her mouth.

Rand stayed a few more minutes, comforting her. Then he left and drove back to the office of Crown Security.

The woman at the office said a man named Youder sometimes worked for them. "He's a specialist in embassy security," she told Rand.

"So I've heard. Do you have an address for him?"

"I believe Mr. Rodgers contacted him directly. Perhaps he could tell you."

Rand broke the news to her. "I'm afraid Isaac Rodgers passed away this morning. I've just come from the hospital."

He left her dumbfounded, phoning the hospital for verification.

Back at Hastings' office, Rand brought him up to date in a somewhat blunter manner. "Isaac Rodgers was poisoned last night. He died this morning. As far as I know, Graham Youder was his only visitor."

Hastings passed a hand over his eyes. "The man's gone mad."

"Perhaps. You're still not telling me everything, are you?"

"Ask me any questions you want. I'll answer them the best I know how. I've lost three men already, I don't want to lose any more."

"It seems to me if Youder has a grudge against British Intelligence it dates from when he was forced out almost a year ago over the

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affair with Cynthia Blandish. Have you or your people kept tabs on her since she left?"

"No, not at all. She wasn't that high-ranking in security clearance to give us any concern. We never even heard if she had her baby."

"She had it. A little boy."

"That's good to hear."

"Tell me something else. Why were you so certain Youder was responsible for her pregnancy?"

Hastings obviously found the whole subject distasteful. "There was a weekend tryst in Bath. She spent the night in a room registered to Youder. It wasn't too surprising in a way. Trysts between bosses and secretaries are something of a cliche in the business world. We just don't expect it in our line of work."

"The sexless life of a British agent?"

"You know what I mean."

"An office tryst is hardly grounds for dismissal of a man with Youder's special skills. I'm sure when they complete the autopsy on Rodgers they'll find a type of poison recommended by Youder in his files. The man has always been skilled in the art of killing. He's certainly someone you'd want on your side rather than against you."

"There were certain financial irregularities," Hastings went on. "The weekend they were together in Bath, some funds were diverted from a planned embassy operation. Instead of being used as they should have been, we discovered later that they were delivered to Youder's hotel room in Bath. He denied everything, of course, including his relationship with Cynthia. He claimed he wasn't even in Bath that weekend, but he couldn't prove it. He's lived alone since his divorce some years ago. The upshot was that we didn't have the evidence to file charges, but we certainly wanted him out of the department. His usefulness was ended."

Rand pondered this latest revelation. "Perhaps he was telling the truth. What if someone else, some trusted member of his Thin Group, used his name in Bath? Is that a possibility?"

"I suppose anything's possible," Hastings admitted.

"And now Youder is killing them all because he doesn't know which one ruined his career and his life."

"My God, Rand—do you think that's the answer?"

"We'll see. The important thing now is to find Youder before he kills again."

"Again?"

"Who was the fourth member of the Thin Group, Hastings?"

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"How did you know?"

"I worked here half my life. I know that code name didn't come out of the air. The letters stood for the first names of the group members, didn't they? Henry Sover and Isaac Rodgers and Nigel Willoby. Who was T?"

"I'd have to check the records."

"Come on, Hastings. The man's life is in danger!"

"All right. I believe it was Theodore Quinlin."

Quinlin was not in the office, but Rand had a good idea of where he might be found. He went back to Southwark and climbed the steps to Cynthia Blandish's fifth-floor flat. When she answered the door, he came right to the point. "Is Quinlin here?"

"I don't know what you mean." She blocked the door with the weight of her body. "Go away. Ted is sleeping and you'll wake him."

"Let me in, Cynthia. I have to speak with you. Quinlin's life is in danger."

The blood drained from her face and she stepped aside. He entered the room and glanced about.

Almost at once, Quinlin appeared in the bedroom doorway. "How did you find me here, Rand?"

"The baby's name is Ted. He's named after you, isn't he? Theodore and Ted. Father and son. You've both got the same color hair. Hastings didn't know for certain that the child had been born, and you denied any contact with Cynthia, yet you told me she and her son lived at this address. You knew the child's sex because you've been seeing both of them, and no doubt contributing to their support. Cynthia *told* me Youder wasn't the father and I should have believed her."

"Rand says your life is in danger," Cynthia told Quinlin.

"I believe Graham Youder is killing all the members of his Thin Group," Rand said. "He knows one of you framed him and ruined his career by using his name on that hotel room. You're the only one left alive."

"Rodgers?"

"He was poisoned last night."

Quinlin looked sick. "Youder phoned me this morning at the office. He says he has to meet me tonight."

"Where?"

"Hyde Park, near the bird sanctuary."

"I'll go with you," Rand said . . .

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As they drove to the park, Rand asked, "How did you get yourself involved with Cynthia in the first place?"

"I fell in love with her, that's all. I suppose it started as an office romance, but when she became pregnant I realized it was much more than that."

"But you didn't acknowledge being Ted's father. You let people think it was Youder."

"Hastings is the only one who ever thought that. I never said anything either way. When I saw what happened to Youder, the shabby deal he got, I wasn't about to admit to anything."

It was still before sundown when they reached the bird sanctuary. "What time did he say he'd come?"

"Not until dark. We'll have to wait."

The crowd in the park gradually thinned out as night approached. Quinlin talked casually about people in the department, many of them unknown to Rand. With the coming of dusk, it became more difficult to recognize approaching shapes. "I wonder if I'll recognize him," Rand speculated. "It's been a good many years since we worked together."

The lights in the park came on. Then, almost at once, they saw a figure materialize from behind some bushes and walk in their direction, the light at his back. "Stay calm," Rand whispered to Quinlin. "He won't try anything with me along."

"I can't tell if that's him," Quinlin whispered back.

"It's Youder all right."

The man drew closer, slowing his pace a bit. In a few seconds, the light from the nearest street lamp would fall across his face. Quinlin drew a breath and stepped back.

Suddenly there was a shouted warning from their left. "He's got a gun, Rand!"

Quinlin was fast, but Rand had been tensed and ready. As the others moved in, he chopped at Quinlin's wrist and sent the small pistol spinning to the ground. Quinlin tried to break free, but Hastings was there, helping wrestle him to the ground.

"What is this?" Quinlin managed to gasp. "That's not Youder."

"As you well knew," Rand told him. "I suspect you killed Youder first, before you even started on the other three."

It took them most of the night to get a statement from Quinlin, back in the building by the Thames which had been home to them

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all for so many years. It was Rand who spoke first, as Hastings turned on the video camera to record it all.

"It came to me this afternoon, Quinlin," Rand said, trying not to be conscious of the camera. "If you were the baby's father and Cynthia's lover, then you were also the one who misappropriated those funds. You were the one in that hotel room in Bath, using Graham Youder's name. If you used it then, last year, maybe you used it again this year. Maybe you were the part-time employee of Crown Security. Maybe you were the Mr. Youder who visited Isaac Rodgers just before he was poisoned. When I called on Cynthia this afternoon looking for you, I was wearing a miniature radio transmitter so Hastings would know where we were at all times. He knew we were supposed to meet Youder, so he sent a security man about his same build down the path toward us. We figured that might break you."

Quinlin spoke for the first time since the camera had been on. "I didn't bring you there to kill you, Rand. I wouldn't have shot you."

Hastings tossed a plastic bag on the table. "No, but you would have strangled him with this wire garrote we found in your pocket. As soon as it was dark enough, Rand would have been dead and another killing would be blamed on Graham Youder."

"I've already explained how I knew you were the person guilty of the acts for which Youder was dismissed," Rand said. "I've shown how you could have been the killer. Were you? I asked myself that question this afternoon in Hastings' office, and I concluded that you were. The evidence that convinced me has to do with the manner of Henry Sover's death, electrocuted while listening in on a wire tap. A poisoned cigarette and a poisoned drink are murder methods aimed at a specific person. Five thousand volts of electricity through a telephone wire seemed like something else entirely—a random dirty trick that may or may not kill someone, depending on whether or not they were in contact with the earphones at the exact instant. Since the telephone line must be disconnected at both ends before the charge is passed through it, Sover couldn't have been listening to a conversation when he was killed. So why have the earphones on at all?"

"Someone must have told him to listen in at a certain time," Hastings said.

"Exactly. If Sover was meant to be murdered like the other two, the electrocution method would only work if the killer knew he was listening to that dead line. Quinlin was his contact on the assignment, so it almost certainly was Quinlin who made sure he was

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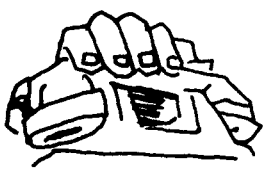
listening when the five thousand volts of electricity went through the line." He turned back to Quinlin. "Why did you kill them? Are you in the pay of the Russians?"

Quinlin shook his head nervously. "Of course not. Youder resented what I'd done to his career. A few months ago he suggested a reunion of the Thin Group. He'd taken a room over a pub in Soho. I got there ahead of the others and we had a terrible argument. He swung at me and I hit him with a brass candlestick. Killed him. The other three walked in to find me with the body. I swore them to secrecy but they weren't happy about it. I couldn't face the rest of my life not knowing when one of them might blurt it out, or try to blackmail me. I wanted to be rid of them and wipe the slate clean. With Youder's notes on murder methods to guide me, the rest was easy."

"What happened to Youder's body?"

"Buried in the muck of the Thames one night at low tide. I'll show you where."

Rand took the morning train home. He told Leila about the affair, but he didn't mention the wire garrote in Quinlin's pocket. She tended to worry about him needlessly.



DETECTIVERSE

BORSTAL BLUES

by CHARLES McARTHUR

When the judge was possessed of the fax,
He said, "I will give you the max—
You broke all the rules
When you copped the crown jewels
And anything less would be lax."

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The murderer had left one clue. Using a grease pencil, he had scrawled three letters across the mirror on the opposite wall. Otherwise there was nothing . . .

ONE CLUE

by RAYMOND STEIBER

The victim was found sprawled across his bed in a hotel room just off the Damrak in Amsterdam. He was a man in his late sixties or early seventies. Well dressed, prosperous. A West German passport. Home address listed as Giessen.

From the condition of the room, it was possible to reconstruct the crime. The murderer had waited until his victim's back was turned, then ripped the cord from the blinds. (Or perhaps he had previously cut it down, concealing it in a pocket or his hand.) Then he had whipped it around the German's neck and yanked it tight. A chair had been overturned. A table lamp. Then the two men had fallen across the bed. (But why *man?* Why couldn't the murderer have been a female? A young woman could easily have strangled such an old man—or even a middle-aged woman as far as that went.)

The murderer had left one clue. Using a grease pencil, he had scrawled three letters across the mirror on the opposite wall. KLM—the initials of the Royal Dutch Airlines. Then he had added an arrow, which from a certain angle seemed to point at the mirror image of the corpse on the bed.

Otherwise there was nothing. A few smudged fingerprints which were utterly useless. A vague description from one of the cleaning women of somebody or other in a raincoat—a man? a woman?—who may or may not have emerged from the room at a certain hour. The name of a prostitute who had been seen in the hotel bar in the company of an elderly gentleman—but when they tracked her down, it turned out to be the wrong gentleman and not so elderly at that.

So it all came down to those three letters. In what way could KLM Airlines be involved in this affair? Had the dead man, whose name was Hartmann, ever been connected with that organization either

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here or in Germany? The airline had never heard of him, and none of its employment records showed his name. Perhaps he had used the airline recently—could that be the connection? But he had come to Amsterdam from Germany by train—his return ticket was still in his possession.

Was the murderer then a KLM employee? But which one? And why should he draw attention to the fact? The victim was meeting someone off a KLM flight—that was it!—and the murderer wanted the fact known. Or perhaps not the murderer, but a third party who was privy to the crime and wanted to see the murderer brought to justice and had scrawled those letters to draw attention to the man without also drawing attention to himself.

KLM—of course! Not the airline at all, but the initials of the murderer. Kurt something. Karl Ludwig something. But why the murderer's initials? Why not the victim's? After all, the arrow pointed to him. But in Giessen everyone said the victim's name was Peter Hartmann and had always been Peter Hartmann even to the day of his birth. So now what? Look for a murderer with the initials K.L.M.? Look for an accomplice with the initials K.L.M.? Check again for some connection with the airline? Or admit the whole thing was a hoax, a red herring, a clever but incorrect signpost placed in their path by a diabolical killer?

With no further clues to work on, the case began to die of its own weight. Eventually it was dropped in the lap of one of the lower-ranking detectives, a certain De Groot. As it involved murder, it was probably his most important case, but it certainly wasn't his most pressing. And so he worked on it in a desultory way, expecting no result and not much aiming for one.

One day at noon, he entered a restaurant on the Leidsestraat. As it was the tourist season, the restaurant was crowded and he was asked to share a table. His table mate turned out to be an elderly man with a thick German accent—a man much like the murder victim, in fact. On an impulse, De Groot began to discuss the case with him as they waited for their meal.

The old man listened with a serious face. When De Groot had finished, he said, "I think, by chance, I can tell you something about the man who murdered this Hartmann. He would be a man my age or slightly younger. Younger, I would think, from the physical requirements of the crime. He knew Hartmann in the past and recognized him, perhaps on the street, perhaps on the train, perhaps

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as a result of the type of conversation we are having now. The moment this happened, he knew he must kill him and carried out the business at the first opportunity. In one way or another, he struck up a conversation with the man. Perhaps they had a drink together. He may then have suggested some restaurant he knew. A fine place, quite jolly. But perhaps first you'd like to freshen up a bit. Fine! I'll accompany you to your room. And once he had him alone, well, whatever weapon first came to hand, that was the weapon he used.

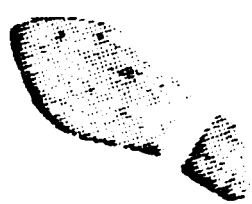
"But I wonder—did he write those letters on the mirror *before* he killed his man or *after?* The arrow obviously after—but what a fine touch if he wrote the letters while his victim's back was turned. The victim turns about. He sees the letters. He realizes who—no, not *who,* he never knew who any of them were—he realizes *what* his companion must be. And at that very moment the cord loops about his neck and he dies knowing, *understanding.*"

De Groot looked at the old man. "I hadn't expected such a vivid reconstruction. I might almost suspect you yourself were the murderer."

"No, unfortunately. I've been able to give you so much detail only because that's the way I would have done it. As for the man who actually committed the crime, I don't think I can name him. But I believe I can tell you something about his victim. I knew him, I'm sure. He was one of the pigs who escaped the net and now has received what he was owed by one of his intended victims. Those three letters—once when I was a great deal younger I saw them every day. They were displayed on the shoulder patches of my tormentors and they virtually burned themselves into my brain."

"But what do they stand for?"

"I thought you would have guessed by now. *Konzentrations-lager Mauthausen.* Mauthausen Concentration Camp."



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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

"Our peerless leader," one of the extras complained when the noisy jeep was gone onto studio property. "Won't ever let us forget his macho past."

"He's the director," another said. "Why does he drive such a down-market machine?"

The first critic nailed it. "Because he enjoys coming on like Rommel . . ."

THE PARKING-LOT DREAM

by WILLIAM BANKIER

Joe Carliss telephoned the casting agency. Any work tomorrow? He was told a thriller needed people for a crowd scene. It paid $40.00 a day, which was better than a poke in the eye with a burnt stick. Carliss would rather be employed as a guitarist, but music jobs were scarce for a man in his fifties. Anyway, he had not come to L.A. expecting to steal work from Laurindo Almeida. The idea had been to get Loretta's arthritis out of the Baytown winters.

When he put down the telephone, Loretta said, "Who's in this movie?"

"The body-builder, Axel Beld." Carliss neglected to say that Stacey Benedicta was also in it. Sometimes, wearing headphones, he watched the MTV channel, his heart beating faster when one of Benedicta's videos came on. Her sinewy figure in split leather and her voluptuous lower lip touched a part of him that Carliss kept concealed from his wife.

Loretta had on her beige-and-maroon uniform. She was on her way around the corner to Ziff's Deli Restaurant to do her shift behind the counter. "Axel Beld!" she exulted. "Wait'll I tell the girls. . . !"

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The studio on Las Palmas was populated mainly by extras. Carliss estimated four hundred of them. The crew had been setting up and lighting the first shot since six-thirty. The call for extras was seven o'clock.

As instructed, they stashed their cars at a parking lot near the Hollywood Bowl. Here, the steward who worked for Stratosphere Casting checked names and handed out pay vouchers. Carliss was told his membership needed renewing. He handed in his expired card and authorized them to subtract the new fee from his day's pay.

Coaches ferried the rabble of aspiring actors down Cahuenga to the studio. They lined up for coffee and danish and then hugged the walls of the building, waiting, while the sun cleared rooftops and palm trees, to be summoned inside. Always waiting. It was like being in the Army.

And almost as dangerous. A jeep painted in camouflage colors roared down the street and almost bowled over a dozen extras at the coffee urn. The driver had a voice like a bullhorn. "Clear the way! Coming through!"

"Our peerless leader," somebody complained when the noisy vehicle was gone onto studio property. "Won't ever let us forget his macho past."

"He's the director," somebody else said. "Why does he drive such a down-market machine?"

The first critic nailed it. "Because he enjoys coming on like Rommel."

Ordered inside at nine, the extras filled rows of bleacher seats at one end of a hangar-sized soundstage. Then they waited. Ten o'clock. Half past. The babble of frustrated performers lying to each other went on and on, countered by an occasional cry for silence from the floor manager.

The word was that Axel Beld would appear after lunch. And Stacey Benedicta. This was their final week of shooting. Once certain scenes were in the can, the stars would spin out of this orbit and into some other universe.

It was boring. It was shameful to be vegetating like this, Carliss thought. A grown man with skills as a musician, expending a day of his life to end up as part of a crowd in the background of a hokey scene in a movie he wouldn't walk across the street to see. At the same time, Carliss had to admit it could be exciting at times. And he was making forty bucks. Which was better than a tumble down a steep flight of stairs.

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The director began putting himself about. He was a chunky man in tight jeans and a windbreaker with exaggerated shoulders. His name was Gerald Q. Lomax. Years ago, he had co-starred as a detective in a long-running TV series. This experience gave Lomax status but did nothing, apparently, for his confidence as a director. He worked in a mood of gloom, as if what he wanted was not what he was getting.

The extras were finally put to work. An assistant director explained that they were reacting to a vicious boxing match taking place between a man and a robot. The fight had been filmed last month and they were not to see it today. But they could use their imagination. On cue, the crowd roared, screamed, shook fists, and jumped up and down for the cameras. Carliss knew he wasn't alone in dreaming, childishly, that some flash of brilliance would set his performance apart and might lead, miraculously, to a career.

Reality was different. In the past four years, he had served as an extra in twenty-eight films, had seen them all, and had yet to catch a glimpse of himself on the screen.

Lunch was another military exercise, the rabble in ragged lines in front of catering vans. And, as in the Army, the senior people complained bitterly about the quality of the food. Carliss thought it was okay considering it was free. He ate quickly and tried to find a telephone to check in with Loretta, who would be off shift from the deli. He located a phone, but eleven kids were waiting to use it. He wandered on, feeling edgy. Thirty-six years married, he was never comfortable away from his wife for more than a couple of hours.

As advertised, Axel Beld made his appearance at two o'clock. Not as large as he appeared on TV, the West German muscleman was still an imposing figure. He moved majestically, with long strides, placing his booted feet precisely. He was wearing a skin-tight Nyrex suit and, in this no-smoking environment, he carried a monstrous cigar. Every now and then, he raised it and took an amateurish puff.

Stacey Benedicta presented herself with less fanfare. Carliss noticed her sitting astride a chair turned backward. Her jet hair was pony-tailed down her back and a broad-brimmed cowboy hat shaded her eyes.

Beld and Benedicta shot three scenes in record time. Gerald Lomax came alive as he directed his stars. Flashes of temperament from Benedicta bothered him. "I can't say the line that way," she moaned after take three. "I don't know what you want."

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Lomax put on a determined smile. "You'll learn what I want, my dear," he said. "I'll make sure of that."

Between these scenes, as cameras and lights were moved, Carliss had time to look around. A man with silver hair was standing by the entrance ramp, casually dressed in grey flannels with a crimson sweater over a white shirt open at the neck. Carliss thought of the outfit as the sort of thing he used to wear in high school. Then he was surprised to recognize the man as someone from his home town. Alvin Rennie! Was it possible?

Rennie had gone on from being an usher at the Baytown Cinema to work in the film industry, directing documentaries. He was several years older than Carliss. Carliss had lost sight of Rennie in adult life, but this certainly looked like him.

Rennie was letting his eyes wander. His gaze bounced off Carliss, then returned to focus. He smiled and raised a hand. Here was a coincidence to make sophisticates smile—two Baytown boys spotting each other on a Hollywood film set!

The extras had been ordered to stay in their places. Alvin Rennie wandered over and gave Carliss his hand. The men brought each other up to date, covering forty years in the briefest time. "Didn't you go to Montreal?" Rennie asked.

"Yes. I played guitar with a CBC staff orchestra. I also accompanied Josh Secord, the folk-singer. Did some arranging. Got married. We moved down here eleven years ago for my wife's health."

Rennie supplied, "I directed a series of documentaries on mountain ranges."

"I saw the one about the Himalayas." Carliss remembered Rennie on camera, looking scrawny in a yak skin.

"I'm based in London now. Micron Films. We own twenty percent of this production." He said it like a man acknowledging it was his car that flattened the animal on the road. "I'm here to put together a deal with Gerry Lomax. It depends on his signing a certain leading lady."

Carliss had a memory that linked him with Rennie. "Remember when you were head usher at the Cinema? I came in one Saturday afternoon with a bunch of kids. You were taking tickets and handing out cards for The Spider serial. We had to rub a spot on the card with spit. If it turned red, we won a prize. You were taking out my sister Mavis. When you saw me, you gave me a card from the bottom of the pack. I nearly died. The spot went red and I won a projector."

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It was obvious Rennie couldn't recall the moment, but he liked Carliss's enthusiasm. "Is Mavis still in Baytown?"

"Yes. I was home three years ago for Dad's funeral." Carliss thought of his sister in the old house with beer in hand and her lap filled with another in the family's series of fox terriers. The breed was long out of fashion, but Mavis always managed to find a replacement.

"There's someone who looks a lot like your sister." Rennie was indicating Stacey Benedicta.

Carliss blinked at the rock singer. It had never occurred to him before. His mental image of Mavis was the current one—a dissipated woman in her sixties. But Rennie was right. Benedicta looked more than a little like the twenty-year-old Mavis. Was this why he liked to stare at the singer as she made those sensuous moves on the television screen? He felt ashamed of himself.

They wrapped the set at half past seven. As the extras were filing out of the building to line up one more time and turn in their pay vouchers, Carliss broke away and put himself at Alvin Rennie's elbow. "Nice talking to you," he said, offering a final handshake.

Rennie was in conversation with Gerald Lomax, who was looking haunted again. The former movie usher drew Carliss into the circle. "Amazing coincidence," he said. "This man and I come from the same Canadian town. I used to go skating with his sister." Faces all around brightened with facile goodwill. "Can you come and have a drink with us, Joe?" Rennie said. "We'll be in Axel's trailer outside."

Carliss almost said his wife was waiting for him but he stopped in time. "Thanks, I'd like to. I'll go and turn in my voucher so I'll get paid." The faces became serious at the mention of wages. "See you in a few minutes."

Joe found the telephone with only one person waiting. When his turn came, he got through to Loretta. He told her about running into Rennie, whose name meant nothing to the former Montreal girl. "He's asked me to have a drink in Axel Beld's trailer. But you've been alone all afternoon."

"Are you kidding? Axel Beld's trailer? You have to go and tell me what it's like."

The interior of Axel Beld's trailer was like a fashion boutique. The weight-lifter's clothes hung everywhere. On a break between setups, Carliss had wandered past the vehicle parked beside the

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soundstage. From the outside, it looked like any deluxe camper in a state park. Now he sipped his beer in a cubbyhole between chrome fittings hung with gaudy shirts and jackets. Beld was lying on a cot. A new cigar, unlit, poked skyward like a snorkel. Alvin Rennie was nattering on the telephone. Stacey Benedicta was listening to Lomax, who was trying to take the rock-singer through a contract he was holding. "Look at the ancillary rights," he insisted. "You get twenty percent of record sales."

But Stacey wasn't interested. "Put it away," she said, "or I'll make confetti out of it."

All this activity left Joe Carliss on his own, which was okay with him. He would finish his beer and take his leave. Loretta would be glad to see him and would be fascinated by his description of behind-the-scenes Hollywood. She was a show-business type herself. Newly arrived in Montreal, aged twenty-one, Carliss had made every effort to display his talent as a singer and guitarist. The Red Feather Revue was a charity show that toured hospitals and raised money for any good cause. Joe fell in with the group and met a girl named Loretta Feeney who did tap routines. She had knockout legs in her mended tights. They necked aboard the bus on the way home from an event in Ottawa. They got married.

With both of them working, there had been plenty of good years, then Loretta's aches and pains led to their California migration. And suddenly the move was eleven years ago. Life, Carliss had begun saying, is an avalanche. The sucker picks up speed and carries all before it. Devastation, then silence. Maybe some beauty in the aftermath. He grinned into his glass—Beld seemed to be serving philosophical beer.

Alvin Rennie was off the telephone. "Glad to see you're enjoying yourself, Joe."

"Thanks for inviting me, Al. I'm going to have to skate."

Rennie seemed disappointed at the idea. "Not yet, Joe. Have another beer." He popped a cap and filled Joe's glass. "What happened with the calypsos?"

"How do you know about that?"

"It was in the Baytown paper. I kept a subscription for years, had it mailed to London. You were billed as Lord somebody-or-other."

"Lord Joseph. At the Maroon Club."

It came flooding back. The smoky room upstairs on Ste. Catherine Street. Carliss onstage behind the bar, drunken faces staring up at him, smartass remarks while he was performing. Once in a while

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he nailed them with some clever invention and brought down the house—not often, but it was worth the aggro. Moments like that were grand-slam home runs.

"Listen up," Rennie was saying. "We have here, all unbeknownst, the famous calypso artist, Lord Joseph!"

Lomax said, "Calypso went out with hula hoops."

"He is going to entertain us now with an original rendition, composed on the spot in the manner of calypso, for this very gathering."

"I can't," Carliss said. "I need my guitar."

Beld put on his heaviest accent. "Ach zo—ve haf vays of makeenk you zing!" He reached under the cot and slid a guitar into view.

What really made Carliss decide to perform was the way Stacey Benedicta sat up on her stool, hands on knees, face radiant, like a child about to be entertained at her birthday party. "Okay," he said, strumming chords, adjusting the tuning. "You asked for it. Bear with me on the rhymes. And pay no attention to the meter." He got the old familiar vamp going, opened up the compartment in his mind where the magic was, and began to sing.

"We all are working here in Hollywood,
The drink is free and the pay is good.
We're producing a movie that the world will see,
But as hard as they look they won't see me."

People laughed and Carliss felt his spirits rise. He hadn't lost the touch. After a few bars' vamp, he began again.

"Our leader is a man named Gerald Q.—
He tells the actors what they have to do.
Oh, lucky man, he has such loyal troops,
Or else he would be selling hula hoops."

While he vamped, everybody guffawed except Lomax, who gave the musician a patient smile. Then Rennie called, "Do Axel!" And Carliss sang:

"From Germany, we welcome Axel Beld,
The best-built man in de whole vide veld.
But the strongest thing about the man by far
Is the wretched smell of his big cigar."

Beld took it well, pretending to look for a place to get rid of the offending stogie. Then Rennie called, "Do Stacey!"

Carliss performed some extra vamping. Sometimes a subject aroused fear in him. This was one of those times. At last, not sure what he would come up with, he sang,

"To end my song, we toast the girl named Stacey—

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Her lovely face could drive a strong man cracey.
She sings like angels in the clear blue sky—"
The rhyme was there but Joe wasn't ready to sing it, so he vamped another bar and then another until he was compelled to go ahead and finish in a way he would never be able to explain.
"How very sad the lady has to die."

Now he was at the center of the party. Now he could not go home. They gave him lots of beer, and when better food than pretzels was called for they climbed into a couple of cars and drove up into the Hollywood Hills. On either side, the residences of the rich and famous hid on hillsides behind stone walls and iron gates. Between them, Carliss caught glimpses of the geometry of city lights. Soon even these elevated dwellings were left behind and they were above it all, speeding across the last summit, past the tourist lookout and along a gravel slope leading to an A-frame cottage erected audaciously on a rocky peak.
"Who lives here?" Carliss barked as he fell out of the car, and Stacey Benedicta, dragging him to his feet, yelled back, "I do!"
Inside, there was room after room exposed to the star-spangled sky, with L.A.'s banner of lights below. Carliss roamed around with his beer, inspecting photographs of Stacey in various incarnations. Some he recognized from his favorite videos. Now that it had been pointed out to him, the resemblance to his sister at that age was striking.
"Where's Rennie?" he asked, wandering back into the main room and finding it occupied only by Axel Beld and their hostess.
"He left."
"Where's Lomax?"
"He never came."
"I thought he was here." Carliss chugged another glass of beer, which was going down now like water. "I must be drunk."
"You're beautiful," Beld said.
"My car is in the parking lot across from the Hollywood Bowl." Carliss wolfed half of a ham sandwich. He was in no hurry to go anywhere.
"We'll take you there," Stacey said.
"All in good time," Beld said, topping up Carliss's glass. "What would our opera be without its meistersinger?"
A little later, Carliss went outside. Fifty yards of dark scrub extended upward beyond the house. He scrambled out among rocks

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and plants and teetered at the world's limit, gulping cool dry air. He wondered if any rattlesnake would bother to make a nest up here and decided not. Only people would go to this much trouble.

Then, on his way back to the A-frame, he turned his right ankle so badly he thought it was broken. He couldn't touch that foot to the ground. When he tried hopping, he fell over and lay there, hissing with the pain. Finally, he called for help.

They both ran out. Stacey carried a flashlight. Beld lifted Carliss like a bride and brought him back over the threshold, into a spare bedroom. A bag of ice was produced and tied in place. The weightlifter was on familiar ground and was able to confirm that no bones were broken, it was only a nasty sprain.

"Lie here and rest," Stacey said. "Give us your phone number. We'll call your wife. If you can't walk tomorrow, we'll order an ambulance." She gave him two caplets and a glass of water. "Take these for the pain."

"Couldn't Axel get me to the car?" Carliss asked, swallowing the medication.

"I won't be here," Beld said. "I'm catching an early flight. I'm judging Mr. Universe in New York."

Carliss closed his eyes, wondering how Loretta would react. She would be impressed, he decided. It was nice of Stacey not to allow his drunken voice to be heard on the telephone. His ankle throbbed and his mind soared from the effects of the alcohol and the analgesics. He sank into a half sleep.

A car drove away. Beld to the airport.

Noisy vehicles seemed to be coming and going. Carliss dreamed of a parking lot. People punching people. Rough guys saying miserable things and knocking each other down. Carliss stayed out of it. That sort of dream.

He opened his eyes to light and pain. He struggled up in the sunlit room and discovered his head ached worse than his ankle. A foul aftertaste soured his mouth. Carliss found a stick of gum in his pocket and put it to work. He limped out into the main body of the house. "Anybody home?" he called.

It wasn't easy to tell where the party ended and the fight began. It could have been all the same event. An overturned glass with a dried-wine spill on the carpet. An ashtray upside down on the sofa. The coffee table on end was not high spirits. Neither was the shattered porcelain lamp, its shade with a hole kicked through it.

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Carliss raised his voice again. "Stacey?"

He found her in the bedroom. She was half naked on the floor, lying face down. Last night she had changed into white shorts and a red tank-top. Now the shorts were gone, the top torn off one shoulder. Carliss knew she was dead. He also knew he ought to leave her alone. But morbid curiosity made him turn her over.

His mouth was about to fill up, he had to get rid of the gum. A scrap of paper lay on the bed. He snatched it up, saw phrases of legalese on it, wrapped it around the wet wad from his mouth, and put it in his pocket.

Her face was unrecognizable. In the Stadium, they stopped fights long before this happened. She had bled a lot and the carpet was crusted with it. Before he could think, Carliss was wiping his hands on his shirt.

He backed off, went into the bathroom, and washed his hands with soap and hot water. His shirt would never be the same. He looked at his face in the mirror and saw an anguished loser. He had to get out of here. It looked as if Axel Beld had done one of his ninja numbers on their hostess before driving away to the airport. But the police might not buy that version with crazy old Carliss at the scene, the dead girl's blood on his clothes, and no clear recollection of what had happened.

How would he get down off the mountain? His ankle was improved but still hurting. Beld would have taken his own car, but that should leave Stacey Benedicta's wheels in the driveway. Carliss looked out the window and saw her car. But even if he could find her keys, he would have to abandon the car on some L.A. street, where someone might see and remember him.

Walking down the mountain and thumbing a ride was the alternative. But he would have to lose the blood-stained shirt. He took it off and stood before the mirror in his undershirt. He looked like an average California health freak.

Half a mile down the hill, he stuffed the bloody shirt into a garbage can outside one of the elegant houses. The occasional car passed him now. He turned and flagged each one, accentuating his limp and the distress on his face.

The third car stopped. The driver was sympathetic but stern. "You'll always hurt yourself running in those shoes. Get yourself a pair of trainers."

Carliss threw in some deception. "I just arrived from back East." By the time he was let out a few blocks from his home on Orange

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Grove, he knew what brand of shoes to buy and where to get a deal on track suits.

Loretta wanted a doctor to look at the ankle.

"No doctors," he said. He was accustomed to doing for himself in the kitchen. Loretta sat at the table in the deli uniform, watching him through her tinted glasses. If he had arrived half an hour later, he would have missed her. He put together a bowl of Bran Flakes with sliced banana on it.

"Did everybody get as drunk as you did?" She never touched alcohol herself. To Loretta, drinking was like cutting yourself with a knife.

After some soul-searching, he told her about the murder. Loretta wanted to call the police. "You should have got on the telephone as soon as you found the body."

"Are you crazy? I had her blood on me. They always suspect whoever finds the body. How could I prove I didn't kill her?"

"If you didn't kill her, you have nothing to fear."

"If?" Carliss followed her to the front door. "That's my point. You're my wife and you think I could be guilty."

When she left, he went to bed. He needed about seven uninterrupted hours for his system to return to normal. He was missing a day's work on the movie, forty bucks out the window, but with Stacey dead, they might even take the day off. He laughed flatly in the darkened bedroom. Hollywood? They would call a press conference and screen her scenes for the gossip columnists.

"Joe?" Loretta was shaking him. "Wake up," she whispered. "The police are here. I haven't said anything."

"What time is it?"

"After six. You slept all day."

He found a cop in uniform and a detective in a wrinkled suit sitting beside each other on the sofa. The detective said his name was Valenzuela. Enough people must have asked him if he was related to the Dodgers' pitcher, so Carliss let it go. Besides, Fernando looked like Babe Ruth, while this guy resembled Joseph Cotten.

Carliss listened to himself saying the worst possible thing. "How did you find me?"

"The maid came in and found the body and called us. When we learned it was Stacey Benedicta, we got through to her agent, who told us she was filming yesterday. We spoke to—" Valenzuela peered

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into his pocket notebook "—a man named Lomax. He said there was some drinking in Axel Beld's trailer—Beld and Benedicta and one of the extras, a Canadian in his fifties, went on to eat at her place. Lomax couldn't remember your name."

"So?"

"The snapshot led us here." The detective took out a glassine envelope containing a photograph. Carliss recognized it. His sister Mavis, in her twenties, was posing by a roadside in a rural setting. "This was on the floor, near the body, just under the bed."

"That's my sister," Carliss said.

"At first we thought it was the victim. It looks like her. But the snapshot is older than she is. Then we lucked out." Valenzuela turned the photograph over and showed Carliss the back of it. Stamped on the blank side was an inscription, faded but legible.

Baytown Photo Centre
109 Front Street
Baytown, Ontario

"We telephoned the police in Baytown and transmitted the picture on facsimile. Small towns are great, everybody knows everybody. The chief identified the woman in the picture as Mavis Carliss. On a hunch, I got through to Stratosphere, the casting service that supplied the extras for yesterday's session. They checked their lists. Joe Carliss, this address."

"I didn't kill her," Carliss said.

"Why are you limping? Was there a fight?"

"I was there last night. We were partying. I went outside to get some air and fell over a rock. I came back inside and they put me to bed."

"They?"

"Stacey and Axel. You should check him out."

"We spoke to Beld in New York. She was alive when he left."

"He says. I was drunk and I was given pain pills. It was a weird sleep. I heard sounds like fighting. I might have been dreaming."

"Dream much?" Valenzuela asked, studying Carliss without malice. "Ever walk in your sleep?"

Loretta tried to serve coffee but Valenzuela wasn't interested. He asked Carliss if he carried photographs in his wallet. Carliss said he did and the detective asked to be shown.

As he flipped through the plastic holders that enclosed his driver's license, social-security card, and medical insurance ID, as well as a few snapshots of himself and Loretta, Carliss came to an empty

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one and remembered, too late, his Stratosphere Casting membership card.

"What was in here?" Valenzuela asked.

Carliss explained. His membership was about to lapse and he had turned the card in to the steward. They would be mailing him a new one. Valenzuela took the picture of Mavis out of its envelope and slipped it into the wallet sleeve. It fit perfectly.

"Ask Stratosphere," Carliss said.

"We will."

"The steward's name is— I forget the steward's name."

"They must know you're innocent," Loretta said after the officers went away, advising Carliss not to leave town. "No guilty man would look and sound so guilty."

"I ran and tried to hide."

"You were scared. They understand that." Loretta turned on the television to a detective series. She kept the sound off, staring at pictures of cars careening down city streets. The detectives piled out and ran into a tenement, chased each other upstairs, kicked open a door, and then stood over an empty mattress with guns drawn. A few moments later they put away their guns and started talking.

"That's Lomax," Carliss said. "Our director. This must be a rerun."

"Of a rerun," Loretta said. Eyes riveted to the screen, she said, "You didn't kill her. Who did?"

"Beld is strong enough to do that kind of damage to the house and to her."

"Why would he do it?"

"She acts better than he does. They kept doing retakes because of his goofs. Maybe she needled him about it."

"Not much of a motive for murder."

"Everybody was drunk. He might have lost his temper and started hitting."

"Okay. Who else?"

"Nobody else was there. Rennie came with us but he didn't stay." Carliss remembered his parking-lot dream. "I imagined this noisy car showed up while I was nodding after the pills. Then I heard arguing, and some time after that the same car left."

"Who could it have been?"

"Say it was Gerald Lomax. He has the same sort of feeble motive. Stacey acted like a prima donna when they had to do some retakes

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on the set. A director's job is hard enough—he wants cooperation, not an ego trip from the leading lady."

Commercials came on and Loretta used her remote to switch channels. She stopped at another chase—not cars this time, but helicopters.

Carliss remembered the drinks in the trailer. "I mentioned Alvin Rennie. He's a producer from England. Owns part of the movie we're making. Hey—he comes from Baytown. He used to go out with Mavis."

"So he might have been carrying the snapshot of her."

Carliss nodded. "He pointed out something I hadn't noticed—that Benedicta looked a lot like Mavis did years ago."

"Then with your permission," Loretta said, "I am going to telephone Sergeant Valenzuela."

As she was dialing, Carliss said, "Ask him to pick up Rennie wherever he is and bring him here."

"Why?"

"I just remembered something about the snapshot."

Three hours later, Sergeant Valenzuela arrived at the Carliss house in the company of a calmly cooperative Alvin Rennie. This time, everybody sat at the dining-room table and took coffee, along with wedges of Loretta's marble cake.

"This is all very nice," Rennie said, "but we seem to be wasting the valuable time of the L.A. police. I didn't kill Miss Benedicta. And I'm more than sure my friend Carliss didn't, either."

Valenzuela said, "Mr. Carliss has admitted he was in the victim's cottage overnight and that he found the body. And that he fled because he believed he would be suspect. What about you, sir?"

"I wasn't there. Joe can confirm that."

"Not while I was up," Carliss amended. "I'm sorry, Al, I think I heard a car drive up after I was in bed."

Rennie's impatience was beginning to show. "I don't mind cooperating with the police, but if there's nothing else—"

"I'm told you used to go out with Mavis Carliss," Valenzuela said. "A snapshot of her was found beside the body."

"Which proves?"

"It only indicates. The dead girl looked like Mr. Carliss's sister. This could have attracted you to her. If she put down your advances, you might have argued. You might have lost control."

"Yes," Rennie said, "and Jack the Ripper might have been Gilbert

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and Sullivan." He frowned at Joe. "Joe here is Mavis's brother. Couldn't the snapshot be his?"

Carliss glanced at Valenzuela for permission to speak, then he said, "When were you last in Baytown?"

"Ages ago," Rennie said. "I'm a Londoner now."

"Try to remember approximately when."

The producer concentrated. "Yes, I can pin it down. It was between films, before I sold my home in Chelsea. That would have been 1954."

"Exactly," Carliss said. "Which is when you snapped that picture of my sister."

"It could have been taken any time," Rennie said.

"Mavis is standing by a roadside. There's a billboard in the background. It says, Greetings, Baytown, from your new voice, CBAY. The radio station opened in the summer of 'fifty-four. They had those boards up for only a couple of months."

After a silence, Valenzuela said, "How do you answer that, Mr. Rennie? I mean ownership of the photograph."

"It's mine. Yes, I drove to the cottage at two A.M.. Yes, I'd been drinking. Yes, I wanted to make love to Stacey Benedicta. I showed her the photograph, told her she was the image of my old flame. She was sympathetic, but she wanted to sleep. So I said goodnight." He shrugged. "I must have forgotten the snapshot when I left."

"Why didn't you tell us this before?"

"For the same reason Carliss ran away," Rennie said. "Because it makes me look guilty as hell."

In bed that night, Carliss murmured, "I'm sorry to be the one to put my sister's old boy friend in jail."

"They won't arrest Rennie," Loretta said. "He didn't do it."

"How do you know?"

"Because I can smell a liar. That man is telling the truth."

"Then who did it?"

"Somebody with a noisy car and a loud voice."

"What do you mean?"

"Your half dream. You heard parking-lot noises, you said. And people arguing roughly. Rennie brought the detective tonight in his Rolls Royce. You couldn't hear him drive up. And even under pressure, he never raised his voice. The killer was the other kind."

Carliss remembered the scene outside the studio when the extras

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showed up for work, the angry jeep roaring past to steal a parking space, the director yapping at the crowd like a boot-camp sergeant.

"Gerald Lomax," he said. "He wanted Stacey for his new project. She told him she didn't want to work for him again. He drove up to see her with a contract and she tore it up."

"I like it," Loretta said. "Can you prove it?"

Carliss got out of bed and began searching his pockets. "I think I have a piece of the contract right here," he said. He produced the wadded scrap of paper covered with legal phrases—and more than likely with Lomax's fingerprints. "But will Valenzuela's forensic people be able to rescue the evidence from my chewing gum?"

DETECTIVERSE

THE SEVENTY-FIVE-PERCENT SOLUTION

by MARY E. DURHAM

The coroner said, "My job's through.
Now, Inspector, it's all up to you."
Then, "Murder," she wrote.
"I can give you"—her quote—
"The how, when, and where, not the who."

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THE JURY BOX
by ALLEN J. HUBIN

Not often are publishing ventures launched expressly to issue mystery fiction; rather more often, established publishers create a new imprint to concentrate on the mystery field. Examples of the former from recent years are The Mysterious Press and Perseverance Press, at opposite ends of the country. Now, more in the middle geographically and also in terms of degree of concentration on our genre, we have McLennan House (206 South Rogers, Waxahachie, Texas 75165).

The first McLennan catalogs feature several mystery novels and some intrigue—besides Texas fiction of a more mainstream variety—and it's gratifying to see this further evidence of vigor in this field. The only volume I've seen so far is *Dead Even* by C. C. Risenhoover ($16.95), billed as the first in the Matt McCall series and reportedly being filmed in the city of its setting, San Antonio. This is either satiric of Spillane's Mike Hammer or intended for unrepentant Hammer fans—I incline to the latter possibility. McCall is a Pulitzer-winning journalist who takes nothing from anyone and occasionally relies on the contacts and skills of an earlier period with the CIA. He also beds women (all gasping with eagerness, of course) at a rate to be wondered at anatomically. Here a lawyer's wife is killed. The D.A. latches onto a suspect with unseemly haste. McCall thinks said suspect is probably guilty of everything except this murder, and sets out to prove it, taking on the high and mighty (who prove to be low, loose, and generously homicidal) in the process. Only for specialized tastes, this; I'll admit the story does move.

In the midst of Len Deighton's series of novels about a nameless spy, known from the film versions as Harry Palmer, he wrote quite a different sort of thing, an episodic novel called *Only When I Larf* about a team of con artists, published in England in 1968. Now, almost twenty years later, and slightly Americanized to *Only When I Laugh*, it arrives for the first time on our shores (The Mysterious Press, $16.95). We first meet Silas, the leader, and his team, Bob and Liz, in New York, where they're fast shuffling a sizable wad of cash away from a pair of greedy self-made industrialists. Then on to London to see what opportunities will arise. Conning proves a risky and uncertain business, especially when Bob decides to displace Silas and lead an extraction scheme himself. Pleasant and amusing fare, though neither as convoluted nor as tense as Deighton's intrigue fictions.

The fifth mystery novel from Perseverance Press is *Rattlesnakes and Roses* (P.O. Box 384, Menlo Park, CA 94026; softcover, $7.95) by Jean Oppenheimer. This is well-

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turned-out romantic suspense in the spirit of the 1960s gothics. Kate Winthrop, headed for an austere academic career, was swept off her feet by wealthy entrepreneur Gary Regal and taken as his bride to the family estate in beautiful Regal Valley outside San Diego. But the family—except for Regal's father—rejected her, Gary grew distant, and Kate fled back to San Diego and filed for divorce. Now her father-in-law is dying and Kate is pulled back to the valley, where someone seems determined that Kate shall also be dead.

Over the Edge (Atheneum, $17.95), Jonathan Kellerman's third novel about clinical psychologist Alex Delaware, is a spectacular achievement. Disturbed and gifted Jamey Cadmus, whom Delaware counseled some years earlier, calls Alex one night, incoherent and needing help. In short order, the eighteen-year-old is in police custody, psychotic and accused of being the serial butcher who's terrorized Los Angeles. Cadmus's family is wealthy, and the best defense attorney money can buy wants Delaware on his team. This starts Alex on a trail along which awaits monstrous evil. Here are unrelenting suspense, vivid imagery, and masterful characterization rich in psychological insight. Not on any account to be missed.

Classic toy collecting is featured in Neville Steed's welcome first novel, *Tinplate* (St. Martin's, $14.95). Peter Marklin, tiring of advertising and a wife at about the same time, left both to settle in the English village of Studham, there hoping to make a living off his hobby: he opens the Toy Emporium. In due course he's hired to purchase a 22,000-pound set of 1920s toy cars from their owner in France. He does so, but on the way back to England the cars disappear. His client wants his 22,000 pounds or the cars and gives the impoverished Marklin three weeks to produce. Looks like Marklin's pretty much on his own to figure out which other greedy collector hijacked the set. And then, as perhaps an aside, what about the *second* skeleton found when the nearby crash site of a WWII single-place fighter plane is being excavated? Excellent stuff—I look forward to another view of Marklin's world.

The sixth in John Gardner's continuation of the James Bond saga is *No Deals, Mr. Bond* (Putnam, $13.95). I reckon this is one of the best in Gardner's uneven series, capturing some of the spirit of early Ian Fleming and nicely sustaining suspense and credibility. Five years ago Bond helped extract five young people from East Germany after their undercover operation came unstuck. They were given new identities and disappeared into British society. But not quite completely. Someone is now finding them and killing them with grotesque attention to ritual. James is asked, unofficially and without his organization's support or sanction, to get the killings stopped. Extremely chancy duty, Mr. Bond.

Susan Dunlap has two series mystery characters, Vejay Haskell and Jill Smith. Smith is a Berkeley police detective, and she turns up

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again in *Too Close to the Edge* (St. Martin's, $14.95). Here the center of attention is a waterfront housing project for handicapped persons. This should attract universal goodwill, but not in Berkeley. On the one side is Liz Goldenstern, wheelchair-bound political activist, and the contractor, Brad Butz, determined but inexperienced. On the other side are the transients, those who exercise the God-given (or at least the Berkeley-given) right to live in cars, buses, trucks, or vans. These psychedelic folk, deprived of other places to park their vehicles, have congregated on an empty lot near the city dump. They oppose the Butz enterprise, which will consume some of their open space. Out of this comes an unexpected and especially tragic killing—that of Liz Goldenstern. *Edge* is very good work, effectively plotted and with an impressive feel for the people and milieu.

Jack S. Scott's Inspector ("Old Blubbergut") Rosher returns in *A Knife Between the Ribs* (St. Martin's, $12.95). Rosher—he with teeth like yellow tombstones, window-rattling nose trumpetings into despoiled handkerchiefs, fists like sledgehammers, eternal warfare with fellow inspectors and his masters—here loses one of his snitches to a knife artist. The dead man was apparently a recent convert to the Brotherhood of Joy, a movement squatting in a local mansion and led by the eternally beaming American, Reverend Mitten. Strange indeed, the goings-on at Pilbeam House, as Rosher, stomping about the city with his large square-toed black shoes, comes to learn. Sparkly, slangy, witty storytelling.

Ian Stuart's latest, *Sandscreen* (Doubleday, $12.95), is one of his strongest. Graham Lorimer works for Maxwells, a multinational London-based corporation whose manager in the Middle East has committed suicide. Lorimer is sent out to make sure no Maxwells interests are compromised and to aid the widow in bringing her husband's body back home. Immediately on Graham's arrival, somebody uses him for target practice. It's soon clear that the manager had been engaging in deadly extracurricular activities, with bloody tentacles reaching to many places, including the heart of London.

Lorimer, a likable and believably human fellow, helps sort it out. Nicely absorbing.

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first publication in the U.S.

"Please, Dorothy, please!" Aunt Emma said on the phone. "This weekend. Can't you do it?"

Elizabeth Ferrars—resident of Edinburgh; born in Rangoon, Burma; graduate of University College, London; founding member of England's Crime Writers Association; summed up in Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers *as "one of the best contemporary writers of civilized murder mysteries . . ."*

JUSTICE IN MY OWN HANDS

by ELIZABETH FERRARS

I have never committed a murder.

I once took justice into my own hands, and if this had happened fifty years ago it might have led to something which perhaps could be described as murder, since capital punishment then was still normal. And to send a person to the gallows, even if this was deserved according to the law, might have been regarded in its way as homicidal. But a sentence for what is called life but which is a mere ten years or so, with time off for good conduct, is altogether a different thing. Only too different, I realize, as the years pass.

It is about eight years ago now that my grandaunt Emma telephoned me one morning and begged me pressingly to come and see her.

"Dorothy, dear, I know you're very busy, but couldn't you spare a couple of days to come down here at the weekend?" she said. "You know I've not been well, don't you, and there's something I want to talk to you about before— Well, as soon as possible."

Her old voice creaked and was a little shaky. She was eighty-six, and a few months before, as I had heard from my sister Marion who lived with her, had had a slight stroke. Considering her age, the old woman had made a very good recovery. She had apparently become

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a little more absent-minded than before, but hadn't been paralyzed in any way and could still enjoy reading and watching television and could even walk around the house a little without assistance.

She had had to give up cooking, which irked her because it had been one of the main interests in her life. At one time, she had even written articles about it for one of the women's magazines. And she had stubbornly gone on with it until her stroke, when, unfortunately for Marion, who could produce a very presentable shepherd's pie and even grill a chop with some success, she had become more critical than she had been in the past and not as grateful as she might have been for all that Marion did for her.

If the telephone call that morning had been a cry for help from Marion, badly wanting a few days off to meet some friends, go to a theater, and do some shopping in London, it would have puzzled me less than our aunt's anxious invitation.

For anxious it certainly was. It sounded almost frightened. The stroke, I thought, must have affected her more than Marion had told me, more perhaps than Marion, spending as much time as she did with the old woman and being too used to her to notice a gradual change, had even realized. Aunt Emma had always been an intrepid character, always busy with half a dozen worthy causes, and had once stood for parliament as an independent candidate. She had lost her deposit but had always referred to the experience as if it gave her some kind of special importance. Apart from that, she was rich, generous, and affectionate.

"Yes, of course I could come if you really want me," I said, "though it isn't just the easiest thing at the moment."

"Please, Dorothy, please!" she said. "This weekend. Can't you do it?"

I could, if it was really urgent, though I usually worked over the weekend. At that time I was employed by a literary agent and often took manuscripts home with me on Fridays to read in the quiet of my small flat in Hampstead. In the office, there were always interruptions, telephone calls, committee meetings, visiting authors, discussions with publishers. And recently I had been letting manuscripts pile up on me. I really ought not to go away.

But if it really mattered to Aunt Emma that I should visit her, the manuscripts would have to wait.

"Very well," I said. "On Saturday morning. Will that be all right?"

"Yes, yes—if you can't come sooner. Couldn't you come on Friday evening?"

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"I suppose I could."

"Then, do! Come in time for dinner. After all, it's only an hour from London and you can take a taxi from the station."

"Can't Charles or Marion meet me with the car? I think there's a train at six which gets to Oxford just after seven."

"Perhaps they could. Yes. No, I don't know. I'll speak to them about it." The anxiety was almost strident in her voice.

"You mean you haven't said anything yet about this visit of mine to Marion?" I said.

"How could I, till I knew you'd come?"

That made sense, but I had a sudden uncomfortable feeling that with her new absent-mindedness Aunt Emma might forget to mention my visit to my sister, which might be inconvenient, if not actually upsetting for her. I suggested that if she was in at the moment I might have a few words with her, but Aunt Emma said in an odd, hurried way that she was not in and anyway there were always lots of taxis at the station. So I accepted it and left it at that. I could telephone Marion later, I thought.

I telephoned her in the evening, but it turned out to have been unnecessary, Aunt Emma had told her about my visit. I wasn't sure that Marion sounded too pleased about it.

"But what's she so worried about?" I asked. "Because she is worried, isn't she?"

"I think it's just that she's got it into her head that she's bound to have another stroke soon," Marion answered, "and she wants to be sure of seeing you once more before it happens. You were always her favorite, you know."

I did know it. Marion, living with her in Oxford, had always done far more for Aunt Emma than I had, yet we both knew that I had a place in her affections that was far beyond any that Marion had been able to win.

"Well, I'll see you on Friday," I said, "and don't bother about meeting me. I'll take a taxi."

"Oh, I'll meet you," she said, "or else Charles will."

In the event, it was Charles who came to the station.

I had never been able to make up my mind about Charles. There had been a time when I had thought that he was in love with me, but it was Marion whom he had married. However, this had not done much more than damage my *amour propre* and not really my

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heart. He was an oddly nondescript kind of man, fairly thin, rather stooping, with grey eyes and a long, pale face and shaggy fair hair which always looked as if he had forgotten to have it cut rather than as if he had deliberately let it grow long. He was a university lecturer in Social History and, according to some people, was brilliant—as would be generally recognized, they said, when he finished his book.

Unfortunately, the book showed no signs of ever nearing an end, and that, to someone in my profession, only too used to people who at some future date were going to produce a work of genius, was no recommendation. All the same, I had always found him a curiously exciting man, though I could not have said why. Perhaps it was his air of wary detachment, his cautious avoidance of becoming more than superficially involved with anyone. It was a kind of challenge.

"It's good of you to come," he said as we drove away from the station. "The poor old thing seems to want you badly. She's made up her mind she hasn't long to live and God knows I hate to say it, but I suppose she's right. When it happens, it's going to be what people call a merciful release. Don't you find that a disgusting phrase?"

"I hadn't realized, from what Marion told me, that she was as ill as that," I said.

"I'm not sure that she is. But she thinks she is, which is what counts. I believe every night, when she goes to sleep, she says to herself she probably won't wake up in the morning. 'If I should die before I wake, I beg the Lord my soul to take.' I believe death is on her mind all the time, frightening her out of her wits."

But he was wrong. It was not death that was frightening Aunt Emma. It was something I personally found more horrible. She was afraid of going mad.

I discovered this during the first talk I had alone with her in her bedroom after the dinner that she and Charles and Marion and I had together in the stately but somehow unwelcoming dining room. Charles and I had arrived at the house in North Oxford, in Elwell Street, which is a turning off the Banbury Road, at about a quarter past seven and we had found Aunt Emma sitting by the fire in the drawing room, dressed in a pretty flowered blouse and a long black skirt, from under the hem of which woolly bedroom slippers protruded. The slippers and the stick propped against her chair were the only indications that she wasn't as well as she had been when I saw her last. She had always been proud of her feet and ankles

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and would never have appeared in public then in anything but the most elegant of shoes, probably Italian and very expensive.

The blouse looked new, however, as if she had been shopping recently, and her white hair was cleverly cut, while her small, wrinkled face, with its pointed features and dazzlingly blue eyes, showed no signs of recent illness.

Marion joined us briefly but said that she was busy in the kitchen and soon left us, and we had drinks and chatted about my journey, about the recent cold spell, about the shocking cost of nearly everything and the state of the country, and pretended there was nothing amiss.

Marion and I were rather alike to look at, though I was slightly the taller and two years the older. Actually, I'm the same age as Charles, which at that time was forty. She and I were both brown-haired and brown-eyed, with oval faces no one could call distinguished, long thin necks, and narrow sloping shoulders. We were slim and I suppose might have made something of this, but neither of us had much of a dress sense, though I had learned to manage a little better than Marion, having found that there was some virtue in it if you worked in a London office, whereas in North Oxford it seemed not to be very important.

I had also learned to cook somewhat better than she did. What she gave us that evening was soup out of a tin, Irish stew, trifle made with custard powder, and instant coffee.

As soon as the meal was over, Aunt Emma said she was sorry but she was very tired and was going straight to bed and hoped that perhaps I would come upstairs presently and talk to her a little. I helped Marion clear the table and stack the dishwasher, waited for about half an hour, then went upstairs to Aunt Emma's bedroom.

She looked very small and shrunken in the big bed, propped up against several pillows. She wore a pale-blue quilted bedjacket and had a book open on her knee, but I noticed that she hadn't put on her spectacles, so she couldn't have been reading. They were on the table at the far side of the bed under a lamp which was the only light in the room. As I sat down beside her, she closed the book and put it on the table, then reached out and took my hand. Her small thin fingers dug almost painfully into my wrist.

"Dorothy, do you understand why I wanted to see you?" she asked with a disturbing note of excitement in her usually calm, though creaky voice. "My dear, I think I'm going out of my mind."

I gave a laugh, which I daresay sounded rather patronizing, patted

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her hand, and said, "Aunt Emma, you're probably the sanest person I know."

Then I realized she was serious and I wished I had chosen a different tone.

"It's just from time to time," she went on as if I hadn't spoken. "I don't think the others have noticed it yet. I have these blackouts. Suddenly I can't remember anything. I find myself in the middle of a room and I can't remember how I got there or where I was going. And I begin a sentence and get lost halfway through it and begin to wonder if it sounds as nonsensical to other people as it does to me.

"And sometimes it's worse than that. I *see* things. Only yesterday I saw poor Bertram standing at the end of the bed, pointing at me and laughing at me. As if he would ever do such a thing! I knew it was an illusion, I knew it as well as I know you're really sitting here beside me, but I couldn't make him go away." Her voice rose slightly. "Dorothy, I'm so frightened they'll find out and then I'll be helpless."

Bertram was her long-dead husband. It was from him that she had inherited her wealth. He had died of viral pneumonia about thirty years ago.

"Does it matter if they do find out?" I asked. "They'll take care of you. You aren't frightened they'll try to put you into a mental home or something like that, are you? People can't do that sort of thing nowadays. It's extremely difficult to have a person put into one of those places if they don't want to go, even when they're truly crazy. And you know no one could say that about you. Anyway, Marion and Charles have always been very good to you, haven't they?"

"But there's the money, you see."

I did not see at once, though I recognized that most things in the end come down to money.

She withdrew her hand from mine and crossed it with the other on the hump her knees made in the bed.

"What I want, Dorothy, is to give you power of attorney over my affairs," she said. "Will you see to that for me?"

I was very puzzled.

"Of course," I said, "but wouldn't it be better to give it to Charles and Marion?"

"I don't think you understand," she said. "You can't give power of attorney to anyone unless it's evident that you're in your right mind and you know what you're doing. And I'm afraid if I wait,

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perhaps—well, I told you: I get frightened sometimes that I'm not quite sane any more and that perhaps I'm going to get worse. You know, I really wish that stroke had finished me off. It would have made everything so much simpler. But if I don't give power of attorney soon to someone, there may be a terrible muddle to clear up when I get really peculiar. And then, even if Charles and Marion don't put me into a mental home, they'll be able to do what they like with me. They'll put me into a home of some sort and everyone will say how wonderfully good they've always been to me. But they won't be able to afford a really nice home where I'd be comfortable and well looked after unless they've got control of my money. And so I want to be sure that the person who's got it is someone I trust. So I want to be sure it's you."

I took a moment to answer, then I said, "Why don't you trust Charles and Marion?"

"Well, Marion doesn't like me, you know," she said. "She never has. She only came here because it was a way of giving Charles the sort of good home he likes that doesn't cost him anything. But she's very bored and she'd love to be back in her old job."

Marion had been a librarian in St. Botolph's College for several years before she married Charles, and in those days had had a nice little cottage of her own in Cumnor.

Aunt Emma went on, "She thinks she could get the job back if she hadn't got me to look after, so she's going to pop me into a home the moment she can. But even if they have control of my money and could arrange to move me into somewhere nice, it would actually be into the cheapest thing they could find—and the last years of my life, or months, or weeks, whatever it turns out to be, would be pretty wretched."

I think I was frowning. "Then just what is it you want me to do?" I asked.

"First of all, fix up the power of attorney," she said. "You'll have to get in touch with Mr. Baybridge. He's my solicitor. Of course, he won't be in his office on a Saturday morning, but if you ring up his home this evening and tell him it's urgent I'm sure he'll come to see me tomorrow. Then as soon as that's been sorted out and you're in charge, I want you to tell Charles and Marion that they aren't needed here any more because you're going to get in a woman from an agency to look after me. I've the address of a good agency who'll send someone to do the shopping and the cooking and everything. It's very expensive, but, after all, I can afford it, particularly as it

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may not be for long, and meanwhile I'll feel—" She paused, then added softly, "I suppose I'll feel *safe.*"

That was the first time I began to wonder if she was in her right mind and fit to give me power of attorney. It should have been the time when I began to take her seriously.

"Very well," I said, "if you're sure it's what you want. It'll be a little hard on Charles and Marion, suddenly being turned out, but I suppose they'll be able to find lodgings till they can buy a house of their own. And the first step you want me to take is to ring up Mr. Baybridge this evening and ask him to call on you here to fix up this power-of-attorney thing."

She nodded. "And please don't tell Charles and Marion about any of this. I know you think I'm being ungrateful, but really, Dorothy—"

She didn't finish the sentence and it was only later that I guessed what she had nearly said.

The telephone was on a table in the hall at the bottom of the stairs. I found Mr. Baybridge's number in a notebook beside the telephone, rang him up, and arranged with him that he should call on my aunt next morning at eleven o'clock. I didn't say anything about why she wanted to see him, but only that she would be very grateful if he would come. But the door of the drawing room where Marion and Charles were sitting was open, and as I joined them Charles said, "So she's going to change her will."

"Change her will?" I said. "She hasn't said anything about that to me."

"Isn't that why she wants Baybridge to come round?"

"Not that I know of."

Aunt Emma's will, to the best of my knowledge, left everything she had divided equally between Marion and me. It seemed to me very unlikely that she should think of changing it.

"Of course, if she did, we could contest it," Charles went on. "I think Dr. Summers would be willing to say that the balance of her mind wasn't all that it should be at the time she did it. Then we might add—" He paused and gave me one of the odd, brilliant smiles that could transform his rather nondescript face into one which, at least to me, had always been surprisingly exciting. "We could talk about undue influence, couldn't we? I mean, in view of the time you've spent with her this evening."

"She never mentioned her will all the time I was with her, and neither did I," I answered truthfully.

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"Anyway, there's nothing wrong with the balance of her mind," Marion said. "She's old, that's all, and it happens she doesn't like you and me, Charles. I don't know why, but it's her right, isn't it? I hope no one thinks my mind is unhinged simply because I dislike some of the people I do."

I said something I was later to regret. "I don't think her mind is unhinged, but she's afraid it's going to be."

Charles gave me a somber look. "Is that really true? It hadn't occurred to me."

I remembered that Aunt Emma had said she didn't think Charles and Marion had noticed her blackouts and other peculiarities.

Trying to make amends to her, now I said, "Oh, I don't know. I expect it's just the aftereffects of her stroke. She's more helpless than she's ever been in her life and she can't come to terms with it."

"All the same, you think she's afraid—" Charles began, checked himself, and he and Marion exchanged a long look which made me wonder if, in spite of his having said that such a thing had not occurred to him before, the two of them might not already have discussed it.

Feeling guilty, as if I had somehow let Aunt Emma down, I said goodnight to them and went to bed.

Next morning I was wakened by Marion, who came into my room with a pot of tea on a tray.

As she put it down on the table by my bed, I said, "This is very nice of you. You shouldn't have bothered."

"It's no bother, I always do it for Aunt Emma," she said. "Come down when you feel like it. You'll probably find me in the kitchen."

"I think I'd like a bath," I said. "Does anyone else want the bathroom?"

"No, go ahead when you like." She turned to the door.

Sitting up, reaching for the tray and balancing it on my knees, I said, "Marion, last night before I went to sleep, I started thinking about the things we'd been talking about. Honestly, Aunt Emma never said anything to me about changing her will. I'd a feeling you and Charles didn't believe me when I told you that."

She gave a shrug of her shoulders. I was sure I saw disbelief in her eyes. But she said, "It wouldn't break my heart if she did change it. What I want is to get back to my job. I don't think I'm cut out to be a nurse, any more than you are. But you've been lucky, no one's ever suggested you ought to give up that job of yours to do the sort

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of things I've had to do recently. You've always got away with everything you wanted."

Except, I thought, marrying Charles, which was something that at one time I had wanted very badly.

"But you're fond of Aunt Emma, aren't you?" I said. "She's always been very good to us both."

"Oh, yes, of course," she answered indifferently. "But I'm no more domesticated than you are, you know. I can't cook and I'm not nearly as good as you are at entertaining people, which is something Charles would like me to do. And doing the shopping and being shut up half the time in this great house bores me beyond words. However, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to start grumbling so early in the morning. It's usually something that works up gradually through the day, if I've got a sympathetic listener. I'll give you a dose of it later."

She went out and I heard her go downstairs.

I drank my tea, then got out of bed, put on my dressing gown, collected my sponge and toothbrush, and went to the bathroom.

I ran a deep bath, washed lazily, and lay comfortably back in the warm water, thinking how strange it was to discover that Marion's life, which I had always to some extent envied, should apparently to her be a kind of trap. I didn't believe that Aunt Emma's money was unimportant to her and Charles. If it were, why had they not moved out long ago and left Aunt Emma to find herself a good housekeeper? The truth was, I thought, that Marion was one of the people who want to have everything without giving up anything to achieve it. She wanted marriage, and her job, and more money than she could earn at it, and a luxurious home to live in.

It was at that point that I heard the shout, or the scream, or whatever the dreadful noise was, and Marion's voice crying out distinctly, "Don't! Don't!"

Then I heard a shot.

I jumped out of the bath, grabbed my dressing gown, and, still struggling into it, ran out onto the landing. A draught from an open window sent a chill over my wet body. The door of Aunt Emma's bedroom was open. I ran in.

What I saw gave me the worst shock of my life. Aunt Emma was lying in her bed with half of her head blown away. Her pillows were a mass of blood. One of her eyes seemed to have come adrift and was hanging half out of its socket. There was a strange smell in the room which I didn't recognize, because I had never before been on the spot when a gun had just gone off. A revolver, or an automatic

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pistol, or whatever it was, was lying on the floor just beside the bed and one of her hands hung down over the edge of the bed, almost touching the gun. Marion was in the middle of the room, shrieking.

Perhaps the right thing to have done would have been to slap her face. One reads that that is the right thing to do with a case of hysterics. But I was very near shrieking myself, so without even knowing what I was doing I wasted a moment fumbling with the zip of my dressing gown, though even when I dragged it shut I found myself shivering inside it. However, when I was no longer half naked I felt more able to cope with things and I took hold of Marion by the shoulders and shook her. Actually, by then she had stopped shrieking and was simply standing there, shaking.

"What happened?" I yelled at her. "For God's sake, what happened?"

"I couldn't stop her!" she answered frantically. "I shouted at her not to do it, but I was too late. I shouted, 'Don't!' but she went ahead and pulled the trigger. I saw her do it, Dorothy, I *saw* her! I came in, bringing her the tea, and there she was, holding the gun to her head. It was as if she didn't know I was there. She didn't even look at me. She just pulled the trigger— Oh—Oh!"

I thought the shrieking was going to start again, but she only took a few steps away from the bed, dropped into a chair, and hid her face in her hands.

I saw the tea tray where she had put it down on the table next to the bed. "Where did the gun come from?" I asked. "Do you know?"

"I think it must be one Uncle Bertram brought back from the war," Marion answered. "I've heard her speak of it, though I don't know where she kept it."

"But why—why should she do it? When we talked yesterday evening, she—well, she had other plans."

Marion dropped her hands. "Wasn't she afraid of going mad? That's what you said yourself. And isn't it a good reason for killing oneself?"

At that moment Charles came into the room.

When he saw Aunt Marion and the blood and the gun and the dreadful displaced eye, he exclaimed something that sounded like, "Oh, my Christ!" but it was in a hoarse, muffled tone and might have been anything. His face had gone a strange grey-white. Turning to Marion, he asked her almost exactly the same questions as I had just asked her and she gave him the same answers, though

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her voice was steadier now. But she kept her eyes shut, as if she could not bear to look at the thing on the bed.

"You really saw her do it?" he said. "You'll swear to that?"

"Of course I will, but why should I have to?" she asked.

"Because there'll be an inquest and you'll have to do it then," he answered. "I'm going to phone Summers now, and then—there's no point in putting it off—I'll phone the police."

Dr. Summers had been Aunt Emma's doctor for about the last ten years. She had regarded him with some distrust as a not very responsible young man, though he was well into his fifties and had several grown-up children. She used to talk wistfully of a Dr. Charters, who had been nearly as old as she was. But young and irresponsible or not, Dr. Summers would not have much difficulty in diagnosing the cause of her death.

Marion stood up. She looked at me.

"Why don't you go and get dressed?" she said, and it was astonishing how calm she sounded. "We're going to have plenty of company presently and it may not be convenient to do it then."

It seemed good sense and I went to my bedroom and started dressing.

I heard Charles go downstairs and the tinkle of the telephone bell below as he started dialing—first, I supposed, the doctor, and then the police. Presently, as I was combing my hair in front of the mirror, I smelled coffee and realized that Marion must have gone downstairs, too, and I felt very glad that she had thought of it. Coffee was just what I wanted then.

Yet I did not go downstairs immediately.

Something was nagging at my mind, something about the room where Aunt Emma lay dead, something that was trying to surface in my thoughts, something that did not make sense.

I found the door of her bedroom closed and I opened it softly, as if I were afraid of disturbing her, or perhaps someone else who might be in there. But of course there was no one and everything was just as it had been when I had been in the room before. But was it really just the same? Why did I feel that something had altered?

I'm not sure how long I stood there, gazing at the desolate room that already had the smell of blood in it, before I realized what had changed. It was the tea tray. When I had first burst into the room to find Marion in the middle of it, screaming, the tea tray had been on the table beside the bed. But now the tray was no longer there. Apparently Marion had taken it down to the kitchen to wash the

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teapot. It seemed an odd thing to do at a time like this, but then it is just at such times that people do very odd things, dictated simply by habit. Probably Marion had not even been aware of what she was doing.

Then I saw that she had not taken the tray downstairs. It was on a chest of drawers, just inside the door.

So far as I could tell, nothing else in the room had been moved. The gun still lay on the carpet beside the bed and Aunt Emma's dead hand dangled above it. But the tray, with a small silver teapot on it, a milk-jug, a cup and saucer and a plate with two biscuits on it, had mysteriously been moved from the bedside table to the chest of drawers by the door.

I solved the mystery of why it had happened quite soon, though it seemed to me a long time that I stood there thinking about it. But when I went downstairs, the coffee was only just ready, so I couldn't have stayed in Aunt Emma's room for more than a few minutes. We drank the coffee in the kitchen, waiting for the doctor's ring at the doorbell. It came after about a quarter of an hour, and when he had taken one look at Aunt Emma's body the only thing he said was, "You've phoned the police, of course."

"Of course," Charles answered.

We all went downstairs again and Marion gave Dr. Summers some coffee.

Sipping it, he said thoughtfully, "I suppose we ought to have expected something like this. She seemed to get over that stroke very well, but I've realized she was depressed, not at all the high-spirited person she used to be. But I'm surprised that she shot herself. I'd have expected an overdose of the pills I've been giving her. They're fairly harmless, but if you took enough of them they might do the job. Did you know she had a gun?"

"Yes, I was telling my sister about it," Marion said. "I think it was a souvenir my granduncle brought back from the war. I've heard my aunt speak of it. But I didn't know where she kept it or that she'd any ammunition for it. The reason she did it—well, something my sister told us yesterday evening makes us fairly sure she'd a belief she might be going insane. And perhaps she was, though my husband and I hadn't noticed anything particularly strange about her. Some depression, yes, but she always seemed to be completely on the spot when one talked to her."

"The insane, though that isn't the fashionable word for them nowadays, can be remarkably cunning at concealing their peculiarities

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from the people round them," the doctor said. "But I don't expect there'll be any difficulties at the inquest. If you know she'd that fear in her mind, it gave her a good reason for doing what she did."

The police arrived only a few minutes later.

A shortish, stolid-looking man in plain clothes, who introduced himself as Detective Inspector Foskin, was in charge, and a uniformed sergeant and a constable were with him. Charles and Dr. Summers took the three men up to Aunt Emma's room while Marion and I waited in the drawing room below, listening for sounds from upstairs. But after the first trampling about, there was a remarkable silence.

Then one of the men from upstairs came down and used the telephone in the hall. I thought he would be telephoning for an ambulance, but it seemed to be a call to the police station, asking for a photographer to be sent as well as someone connected with fingerprints. I heard Marion let out a long breath. She was standing rigidly in front of the fireplace, where the ashes from yesterday's fire were still in a heap. A woman came in on most mornings who cleaned the house and cleared the grate and laid a new fire, but she did not come on a Saturday.

The sergeant who had been telephoning came into the drawing room and said Inspector Foskin would be glad if Marion and I would join him upstairs and tell him exactly what had happened that morning.

We went upstairs, the sergeant following us, and went into the bedroom.

I heard Marion give a little gasp of shock. It did not surprise me. The tea tray, which had been on the chest of drawers by the door when she had left the room, was now back on the bedside table where it had been when I had first entered the room that morning.

Inspector Foskin seemed very interested in it.

"I understand from your husband," he said to Marion, "that it was you who discovered the body this morning. Would you mind telling me exactly what happened?"

She stood there, staring at the tea tray. Then she turned and gave me a long look. Then she turned back to the Inspector.

"I came in, as I usually do, about a quarter to eight," she said. "I brought my aunt her tea, as I did every morning, and I saw her with the gun at her head. I think I shouted, 'Don't!' or something like that, and I ran across the room to her, but before I got to her

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bedside she'd pulled the trigger. I believe I started screaming. I'm not really sure what I did. The next thing I remember clearly is my sister shaking me and asking what had happened."

"But the tray you were carrying," the detective said in his stolid way. "What did you do with it?"

"The tray?" she said stupidly, as if she didn't know what he was talking about, although her attention had been on it ever since she and I had come into the room. "I don't know. I suppose I put it down somewhere."

"Here on this table," he said, pointing. "Although you saw your aunt with a gun at her head, you carried the tray across the room and round the foot of the bed and put it down here and only then started screaming. I find that very hard to envisage. If you'd simply dropped the whole works on the floor, or put it down on the nearest thing you could—that chest of drawers by the door, for instance—I could understand it and I should probably believe your story. As it is, I'm inclined to believe it may have been you who pulled the trigger *after* you'd put the tray down on this table."

Marion's eyes met mine again. I suppose she was thinking of the time while she'd been making coffee which I had had to myself upstairs, getting dressed and then no doubt returning to this room and putting the tray back where I had seen it when I first came into the room. Believing that she had rectified the error of leaving it on the bedside table before she killed Aunt Emma, she had been feeling reasonably safe. And so she might have been if she had kept her head, if she hadn't turned on me and tried to scratch my eyes out with her nails. The evidence against her was really very scanty.

But she was not really the type to attempt murder, any more than I am myself. I went so far as to deny that I had touched the tray, and as I had been very careful to leave no fingerprints on it I was believed. In the end, after another attack of shrieking, Marion broke down completely and confessed she had killed Aunt Emma. To the end she believed that Aunt Emma had been about to change her will, cutting her and Charles out of it.

She was sentenced for life.

But of course a life sentence doesn't really mean life, and the years have been passing. Charles and I have been living together for a long time now, but I am not quite sure what will happen when Marion is released from prison. I think he is happy with me. I gave up my job long ago and we live in the old house in Elwell Street.

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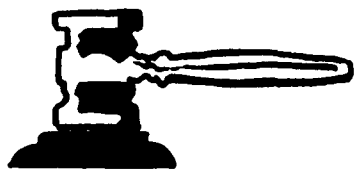
We have plenty of money and entertain a good deal, which he enjoys. But the scandal of the murder did him a fair amount of damage and he never obtained the professorship he would have liked.

I still don't know for certain if he was involved in the shooting of my aunt, or if the whole guilt was Marion's, and I don't like to dig too deep. She never said anything to incriminate him, but perhaps, as his wife, she would not have been able to do so. However, he has always claimed that he really didn't know what she intended to do that morning when she went downstairs to make the tea. All the same, sometimes I see him looking at me in a way that makes me wonder about the future.



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a *NEW* short story by

MICHAEL BERES

"It's doing quite well," the plant lady said. "A butterfly palm doesn't need much natural sunlight." She stared at him, around him, through him. Her arms were stretched downward, palms cupping the formica edge of the credenza, ringless fingers hanging limp. Waiting.

Michael Beres' first mystery novel, Sunstrike, *was published in 1986 by PaperJacks, his second was due for publication by another publisher in late 1987, and his third, now with his agent, is a suspense mystery based upon the Chernobyl incident . . .*

THE PLANT LADY

by MICHAEL BERES

She came to Nick's office once a week, every Thursday afternoon. She carried a large watering pail, a child's pail with multicolored flowers and butterflies painted on its smooth, round surface. When she walked, she shook the tail feathers of the pink feather duster protruding from the rear pocket of her khaki trousers. For pruning, she carried a pair of long chrome scissors in a leather holster hung from her belt. The shiny tips of the scissors protruded from a hole worn in the holster, the sharp points dangerously close to her thigh. Last week he had told her about the scissors, had warned her to be careful when stooping or sitting down, but she had simply looked at him and smiled. Now he wondered if she was deaf.

Her hair was long and brown, her lips large and wide and pressed tightly as if she were constantly holding back a comment, a secret. Whenever she came into his office, Nick watched her tend his plant, her shoulder blades and spine arching against the thin cotton of her

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green T-shirt as she bent over the palm near the door. Last week, when he spoke to her, she had turned and looked at him, her eyes vegetative and sleepy, minutely askew, so that she seemed to be looking at the same time at his face and at something beyond.

A few minutes ago, Herb had come around the corner and said, "Your girl friend is here, Nick," then headed down the hall to the coffee station to refill the mug he sipped from all day, turning his teeth into yellow daggers.

Nick looked out the window. The green-and-white Tropical Plant Service van rested against the yellow curb in the visitors' lot, the windshield aglow in the morning sun so that he couldn't see inside.

She stepped from the van, carrying the pail. She inserted the handle of the pink feather duster into her rear pocket, adjusted the scissors in her holster, and walked—to the bass-guitar rhythm in his head—around to the front entrance of the building. The guitar beat belonged to no particular song—was, instead, a combination of rock songs memorized during his drive into work that morning and repeated over and over like a heartbeat to drown out the senseless strings of the background music layering the stagnant air of the office.

Herb stopped at his office door, steaming coffee mug held out as if about to give a toast. "If I pour some of this witch's brew in your plant, it'll die, Nick, and she'll have to bring a new one. Would you like that?" He heehawed a horselaugh and scratched at his nose with his free hand.

"No, Herb. I don't think that'll be necessary."

"Why not? I hear old Boylston'll probably be cutting the plant service next. Overhead, my friend."

Herb walked on, leaving the wall and carpet of the hall framed in the doorway, a painting called *Beige Spirit* by an unknown artist about to commit suicide. The speed with which Herb had disappeared made Nick continue watching the door. He expected to see Mr. Boylston arrive with more work, with new directives, with the trappings of a boss on a Thursday afternoon. But the doorway continued its existence as the painting by the suicidal artist.

The plastic nameplate on the door had given his name to the plant lady. *Nicholas Michalopoulos*. The notepad on his desk had, if she had cared to look, given his title. *Accounts Payable Coordinator*. The absence of a ring on his hand had given his probable marital status. *Single*. In the wastebasket where she deposited clipped leaves was further evidence: the crumpled note from his mother, the note in-

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serted each day in his lunch. Today's note said, "Enjoy your lunch, my son. Work hard for your supper. Stop at the K-Deli for a tin of olive oil."

A goddess disguised as a plant lady, she entered his office and began her work. She placed the watering pail on the floor, drew the scissors from the holster, and separated yellowing leaves from the mother plant, the leaves falling helpless to the windless plain of industrial, beige carpet. She roamed, bent over, about the plant, her buttocks flattening the creases of her trousers, her brown hair the mane of a grazing animal. Between her legs he could see yellow leaves falling like birds with clipped wings. A smell like freshly cut fruit, perfume. The zoom lens in his mind positioned him directly behind her. The X-ray machine in his mind removed the trousers and placed his hands on her sides. The scissors snicked their admonition, tsk-tsking his thoughts.

As she stood, she gave the scissors a Bat Masterson twirl into the holster and hoisted the watering pail. The spout of the pail ejaculated spurts of H_2O molecules into the earth world of the plant. Then she dusted the plant, picked up the yellow leaves, and turned about to search for the wastebasket, the basket he had just this morning moved to the far end of the credenza so she would be forced to walk along the side of his desk nearer to him.

He turned his chair and watched her drop the leaves into the wastebasket. His chair squeaked like a child tickled. His voice squeaked, then caught.

"I—I really appreciate how well you've taken care of the plant."

She would go now, perhaps acknowledge his comment with a smile as she hurried out. But she did not go. She turned, placed the watering pail on the credenza next to the stack of monthly financials, and sat back on the ledge of the credenza. She looked to the plant, then back to him. "Yes, it's doing quite well. A butterfly palm doesn't need much natural sunlight."

She stared at him, around him, through him. Her arms were stretched downward, palms cupping the formica edge of the credenza, ringless fingers hanging limp. Waiting.

"I hope you'll keep coming here," he said.

Staring. No perceptible reaction.

"The reason I say that is because I heard they might cancel the plant service. Budget cuts and all. If it were up to me, I'd increase the service, double the number of plants."

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He suddenly realized he had tilted his chair back and folded his hands on his stomach. Was he trying to conceal the size of his stomach or was he trying to look like some damn executive? Like someone who could make a difference—get more plants, rip up the lousy beige carpet, hire art students to paint murals on the walls.

The plant lady crossed one foot in front of the other and leaned harder against the credenza, the flesh at the backs of her thighs bulging out slightly from the pressure.

"I know about the budget cuts," she said. "My boss told me this morning this would be my last trip here."

The air-circulation system hissed in the false ceiling above. "I Want To Hold Your Hand," butchered by has-been musicians, echoed from the ceiling speakers in the hallway. The mailboy, wearing blue-and-white sneakers like the plant lady wore, rushed past the doorway, the wheels of his cart squeaking like a baby bird pushed from the nest.

The plant lady glanced toward the hallway, a statue in profile, her chin high, exposed to him, a place to touch, to kiss. Had anyone kissed her there? Had anyone praised her beauty? Surely as she bends over plants in corporate offices, she must be aware of the stares of men. Surely she hears comments on her beauty, gets asked about the weather, the species of a certain plant, the amount of water needed, whether she'll go out for a date or at least meet somewhere for lunch.

She lifted her water pail and walked toward the door. She paused near the plant, touched the leaves, said, "Goodbye."

To him? Or to the plant?

"Won't you be back?"

She was in the hallway now. She turned. "No."

"What about the plant?"

"All the plants belong to your company now. Just water yours once a week, clip off the yellowed leaves, and dust it occasionally. It'll be okay."

When she had gone, he realized he had stood behind his desk, his fists clenched tightly at his sides the way they did whenever a scantily clad woman appeared on television and his mother went on about how filthy it all was, how girls in the old country would not display their bodies so.

He began his search for the plant lady on the second floor, where the sounds of clattering computer-terminal keys whispered from the

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rows of cubicles. He walked up and down the aisles looking into each cubicle. In some he saw the telltale droppings—yellow leaves atop computer printouts in wastebaskets. The maze of cubicles seemed endless, the occupants of the cubicles looking up from their terminals like zombies acknowledging his presence.

The Programming Department secretary asked if he could deliver some reports back to his own department and he had to wait while she separated the printouts and attached notes with paperclips. The secretary's name was Becky. She had a round face and frizzy black hair. She always smiled like crazy, probably because she was the sweetheart of programmers. Her fingernails were painted lavender. The bottle of polish and nailfile rested near the covered candy dish on her desk. She assembled the printouts slowly. The digital clock on her desk flashed the passing of seconds.

He grabbed the pile of printouts from her and walked quickly to a window at the south end of the building. The van was still parked below. As he finished his rounds of the second floor, he tried to imagine what he would say to the plant lady when he found her.

"I wanted to speak with you," he would say.

"About what?" she would say.

About plants? About the economy? About the weather?

She would be busy, perhaps with the array of plants in Executive Row. The secretaries would see him, a male dog in heat sniffing out his potential mate. Executive Row. First floor. He hurried to the front stairs.

In the stairwell, Chester, the one-eyed analyst, confronted him, the real eye staring at the printouts, the glass eye staring somewhere else.

"I see you got your reports," said Chester.

Nick sidestepped Chester. "Yeah—thanks."

"I hope the format's okay this time."

"I'm sure it's fine."

Chester's voice echoed above him. "I'll come to your office and explain them for you."

"I'll call you," Nick said as he pushed through the door at the bottom of the stairwell.

A Cyclops. Chester the Cyclops trying to capture him in the stairwell while he struggled to return to Ithaca where Penelope waited, remaining faithful to him if he could only find her, if he could only tell her what he wants. What *did* he want? A date? A date where? The arboretum? The drive-in? The beach? The museum?

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The plants in Executive Row had been tended. He saw moisture glistening on the mulch, more yellow leaves in wastebaskets. He could smell her trail—clipped leaves, stems oozing perfume. The background music, a Mantovani-ish version of "California Dreaming," accompanied his forage of the first floor. The photocopying machine mocked him as he passed, one copy a second, one copy for each year he had stayed with his mother, one copy for each time he had thought of asking a girl for a date. The machine nick-nicking away as the van pulled away from the building carrying the plant lady away from him forever.

But when he got back to his office, when he looked out the window, the van was still there, the windshield glaring at him. He waited, and when the van did not pull away he looked at his credenza where the plant lady had sat. He put down the printouts and touched the formica edge of the credenza. If he were a dog, he would lower his head and sniff, inhale her scent, carry the scent with him on his search.

"Is this a private meditation or can I join you?"

Herb was standing in the doorway.

"What do you mean, meditation?"

"I don't know," said Herb. "You just look pensive is all."

Nick went to his desk and sat down. Herb sat across from him, coffee from his mug sloshing over on a stack of unpaid invoices. One of the invoices, a pastel-green one, was from the Tropical Plant Service. Herb wiped the spilled coffee with a stained handkerchief.

"Sorry, Nick. I hope these aren't important papers."

"No. Just more bills. One of them is from the plant service. Boylston hasn't signed the P.O. yet."

"Will he?"

"He has to. It's last month's bill."

"Don't count on it, Nick. When he cancels the service, he might just sit on the last bill for a while."

"How do you know he'll cancel it?"

"You know Boylston," said Herb, pinching an imaginary penny between his fingers. "And besides, she's in Boylston's office."

"Who?"

"Your girl friend, Nick. The broad who waters the plants." A laughing hyena, yellow canines chomping the air.

"What the hell does he want with her?"

Herb was staring at the desk, staring at his fist. He had pounded the desk. He had given himself away.

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Herb opened his eyes wide, mockingly. "I didn't know you were a plant fancier."

"Well, I am. It's the least they can do. A little freshness in this sterile box. The goddamn windows in this place don't even open. And that insipid music always playing!"

"It's supposed to ease the tension. It's just background music. I kind of like it."

"Well, I don't. If I had my way, I'd rip those speakers out of the ceiling."

"Of course, they could play patriotic ditties," said Herb. "Some John Philip Sousa, like they did when I was in P.S. one-forty-eight."

"Yeah, then we could march around like the idiot robots we are!"

Herb sipped his coffee and stood. "The idea of canceling the plant service really bothers you, huh, Nick?" He was at the door now. "If you're such a plant lover, why don't you take it up with Boylston?"

The beige walls and carpet of the hallway swam before him. The stale concert from the ceiling blanketed the air like phlegm. A man and woman cackled as he passed the coffee station, their voices high-pitched and repulsive. The carpet was worn flat in the center of the hallway, tattered and faded. The path he had trod over the years between his and Mr. Boylston's office. The path of unending days, months, and years, carrying a cargo of invoices, purchase orders, check requests. There was no doorway at the end of the hallway—no window, no natural light, only the shadowless wash of fluorescence.

He had planned to walk into Mr. Boylston's office and demand to know if the plant service was being canceled. He had planned to stand before Mr. Boylston's desk, perhaps pound his fist, his seniority allowing him this momentary flight of anger. Mr. Boylston would ask him to calm down, ask him to sit down so they could discuss the plant situation. He had planned to do all this even if he put his job on the line. But when he rounded the corner in the hallway, he saw that Mr. Boylston's door was closed.

Useless. His entire life sacrificed to purchase orders and invoices, meaningless stacks of forms containing meaningless numbers. His paycheck cashed twice a month to support his mother and save for a future he could not see.

As he stood before the closed door, he remembered how the plant lady had looked at him and at the same time beyond him, as if she could see the future. A patient look, waiting for something, waiting for him to do something that would affect the chain of events, cause

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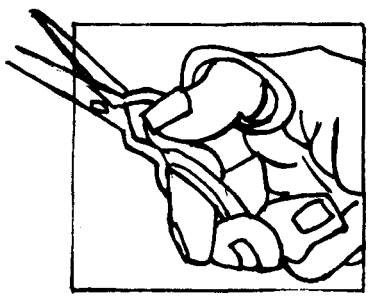
their lives to converge. He pictured her tending enormous potted palms in his mother's front room, standing on a ladder clipping yellowed leaves, turning and smiling down at him. He held out his hand and helped her down the ladder. They embraced and kissed and in that moment he could visualize their life together. Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas Michalopoulos.

The doorknob wouldn't turn. The door was locked, but the latch hadn't caught and he was about to push it open.

The light in the office was out, the drawn drapes giving the office a pleasant glow. Mumbling. Breathing. Clothing draped across the desk. Men's slacks and shirt. Khaki trousers. A pink feather duster. A child's watering pail.

He thought he was standing still, but he was walking, the scene on the floor behind the desk unfolding before him like a dream. The plant lady's skin was white against Mr. Boylston's writhing yellow flesh and her head lay to one side, her hair seeming to grow from the beige carpet. When Nick unclenched his fists, he felt cold air from the circulation system in the ceiling on his palms. Near the edge of the desk, the shiny chrome scissors, used to prune away yellow and drying growth so the healthy parts of the plant would flourish, waited in the worn leather holster.



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a ***NEW*** **short story by**

IAN STUART

Once or twice Francoise looked angrily at Marcel, who was spending too much of his time at Nicole's table. People at his other tables were becoming restive. Once, when he and Francoise went out to the kitchen at the same time, she could be seen speaking furiously to him. He answered as angrily, and it occurred to Jonathan that if Marcel wasn't careful he would be looking for another job before long. Francoise might be charming, but she was the owners' daughter, and her chin had a determined look to it.

Ian Stuart has assembled a fascinating cast of characters and a no less fascinating setting—the two-star, provincial Hotel Marais in the French Pyrenees a few miles north of the Spanish border . . .

FRANCOISE

by IAN STUART

"Women use you," my Uncle George said to me when I was about ten. "Avoid 'em, lad."

It was advice he never heeded himself. He had been married and divorced, expensively, twice at that time, and he was to be both twice more before he died. I don't suppose he expected me to take it, either, and I didn't.

It is one of my basic beliefs that only fools and born villains become crooks. What's the point of spending some of the best years of your life in jail when you can make a very nice living without working too hard, and still not break the law? Bend it a little, maybe, but they can't put you inside for only distorting it. Not yet. Mind you,

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since they passed all those consumer-protection acts it's not as easy as it was. I suggested to my MP once that the acts were illegal because they were a restraint on trade. He laughed like a drain, and I got the impression he didn't think I was serious.

Nevertheless, in spite of the difficulties there are still ways for anyone with a bit of initiative. There always were, and human nature being what it is—pretty greedy, for the most part—I reckon there always will be.

My speciality used to be multiple-share applications. I had other lines as well, of course. Ticket touting was one of the most profitable, but it hadn't as good an image as share dealing, and over the years I did rather well out of the old multiples.

They're dead easy. When a share is issued that you know will be in great demand from people hoping to make a quick buck without working, you put in a lot of applications under different names. That way, when there's a ballot for the shares, or everybody's application is scaled down because there aren't enough shares to go round, you can count on getting more than the poor punters who only put in one application for the number they actually wanted. With any luck, when dealings start there's a nice fat premium and you sell.

True, you have to send a check for the amount that's due with every application, but in the old days the checks were never presented until after the ballot. So if you'd been lucky, you had time to make the necessary arrangements. I once put in fifty applications for 1,000 shares each at a price of £1 and made a clear £5,000 profit. Which wasn't bad for a few hours' work going round collecting fifty forms and filling them up.

Then the people in the City turned nasty. They decided that making multiple applications was an undesirable practice, and they threatened to present all the checks at once. At the time, I'd just put in thirty forms for a total of 30,000 shares at £1.25. There I was with £654.21 in the bank and the prospect of checks for £37,500 being presented any day. That time it was a bluff, but I had a nasty few days.

Presenting checks was bad enough, but when they started prosecuting people like me for deception I decided it was time to call a halt.

Which explains how I came to be swanning—well, more ducking than swanning, really—round the quieter parts of the South of France looking for a more or less legitimate way of replenishing my rapidly dwindling resources. One of the disadvantages of my profes-

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sion is that the expenses are high; you don't expect to find the wealthy and naive in grotty boarding houses.

Also, I was avoiding Diane and Caroline, but that's another story. Or, rather, two stories.

My name was Jonathan Davies. I say "was" because it hadn't been before, and for reasons of my own I have never felt inclined to be Jonathan Davies again since. Moreover, it wasn't the name in my passport. I'd worked it out that if anybody challenged me with that indisputable fact, I would tell them that Jonathan Davies was my pen name and, as I was better known by it, that was the name I generally used. They might say they had never heard of me, but there are thousands of authors and how many of them can you name offhand? If they got too persistent, I'd tell them to mind their own bloody business, but it didn't seem likely they would.

I came to St. Bernard Pied du Port on a fine, sunny afternoon and a wave of euphoria. Partly it was the weather, but more it was Nicole. She had been staying at the hotel in Luchon where I had spent the last three days—unfruitfully as far as business went, but delightful all the same. My only regret was that I wouldn't see her again. But such is life, and it had taught me to be philosophical about these things. Besides, however much I may be attracted to a woman, a short acquaintance seems to suit my temperament best.

St. Bernard nestles amidst low, rounded hills a few miles north of the Spanish border, a busy little market town, but peaceful just the same. I had been there twice before, and stayed both times at the Hotel Marais, a pleasant two-star place at the foot of the steep main street. I liked the Marais—the rooms were better than you always get in small provincial hotels in France and the food first rate. Also there was Francoise. Francoise was the daughter of the couple who owned the Marais, and she more or less ran the "front of the house." She was about twenty-eight and not at all pretty, but pleasant and very efficient.

I parked my hired Citroen in the space in front of the hotel, got my bag from the boot, and carried it into the lobby. Francoise was behind the desk.

"Bonjour, Mademoiselle," I said. *"Avez-vous une chambre pour deux ou trois nuits, s'il vous plait?"*

She gave me a brilliant smile of recognition. *"Mais oui. D'accord. Vous etes seul?"*

"Quite alone," I assured her, surprised she remembered me. After all, I had only stayed there twice before, and I had never smashed

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up the bar, left without paying my bill, or done any of the other things which make guests memorable in the eyes of hoteliers. In my work it paid to keep a low profile.

She showed me up to a room on the first floor and left me. I unpacked some of my things, washed and changed, and started back downstairs with the intention of going for a stroll before it was time for a pre-dinner aperitif. But halfway down the stairs I stopped, hardly able to believe my eyes.

For standing by the reception desk was Nicole. She was wearing a white-and-black dress, and on the floor by her feet was a large expensive suitcase.

For a second or two I stood there, gazing at her. "Nicole!" I exclaimed.

She turned, and her lovely dark eyes studied me with amusement. " 'Allo, Jon," she said. She spoke fluent English with an adorable accent.

"What are you doing here?"

"Staying, *cheri*. See? My valise."

"You didn't say anything at Luchon."

"I was not sure then if I could come." She smiled. "And I thought it would be a little surprise, no?"

"Yes," I said.

She let me kiss her discreetly on the cheek like an old friend while Francoise watched with interest.

"I must go to my room," Nicole told me. "I am a wreck."

"You look wonderful," I assured her.

She laughed, the low, slightly self-satisfied laugh with which beautiful women accept such compliments. I had never assumed that false modesty was one of Nicole's failings and, anyway, it wasn't a quality I admired. I have always preferred alluring women to be confident of their appeal.

Francoise's smile was becoming rather fixed, I thought, and I told Nicole I would take her case up to her room, but she wouldn't let me.

"I'll see you later then?" I said.

"Of course, darling." She raised her delicately plucked eyebrows in a way which suggested I hadn't needed to ask. I suppose I hadn't; after all, she had more or less admitted that she had come to St. Bernard to give me a surprise.

As I went out to the street, I saw Francoise pick up Nicole's case

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and lead the way up the stairs. Nicole glanced back over her shoulder and smiled at me.

I like St. Bernard. Through it, centuries ago, pilgrims trudged or rode their mules on their long, weary trek to Santiago de Compostella across the frontier in Spain. Except that until 1659 there was no frontier, and all the Basque country on both sides of the Pyrenees was part of the kingdom of Navarre. Nowadays, the pilgrims come in their Renaults and Peugeots, and they're bent on pleasure rather than repentance and forgiveness. But the bishops' prison still stands halfway up the steep, cobbled Rue de la Citadelle, a street so narrow that a tall man standing in the middle could almost touch the buildings on each side with the tips of his outstretched fingers. Prisons, however, are places I prefer to avoid, even when they've been disused as long as that one.

I spent a pleasant hour strolling round the ancient streets. Whenever I have been to St. Bernard, they have been thronged with people walking along singly or in small groups, housewives and tourists, and they were that afternoon. But my interest wasn't wholly casual. I was there on business, going over the ground.

I returned to the Marais in time for a leisurely drink before dinner. I had hoped that Nicole would join me in the bar, but there was no sign of her and eventually I went in to eat alone.

There was only one waiter at the Marais, a man of about thirty named Marcel. He was much too handsome in a very Latin way and distinctly sullen, when he wasn't waiting on women. When he was, he became all smiles and charm. It always surprised me that the owners kept him on, his style seemed so out of keeping with the rest of the hotel, but I suppose he did his job well enough.

Francoise helped out at dinner, and I always tried to ensure that I got one of the tables she looked after. But when I entered the dining room that evening, it was already nearly full. There were a number of guests staying at the hotel and, as usual, a sprinkling of local people had come in for dinner. Nicole was already there, sitting alone at a table for two by one of the big windows, but she was intent on the menu and didn't notice me. I was hoping she would look up and signal to me to join her when Marcel came and steered me away to a table by the wall at the other end of the room. I cursed him silently, but at least the table was in the part Francoise looked after. I don't suppose Marcel was any keener than I was on his waiting on me, and he probably did it on purpose.

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Francoise was as charming and attentive as ever, but once or twice I saw her look across angrily at Marcel, who was spending too much of his time at Nicole's table, and making no attempt to disguise it. People at his other tables were becoming restive. Once, when he and Francoise went out to the kitchen at the same time, I saw her speaking furiously to him. He answered as angrily, and it occurred to me that if he wasn't careful he would be looking for another job before long. Francoise might be charming, but she was the owners' daughter, and her chin had a determined look to it.

By the time I left the dining room, Nicole had disappeared. The Marais doesn't possess a lounge, but the lobby is large and there are several chairs spread around it. Nicole was seated in one of them, reading a magazine. The sun, shining in through the glass doors, highlighted the left side of her face and she looked like a beauty in a Beaton portrait—cool, elegant, and aloof from the everyday world.

When I came in, she looked up. "Jon," she chided me with a mock disappointment I found adorable, "I 'ave waited so long for you."

"I didn't know where you were," I defended myself.

"But I said I would see you after dinner, no?" She pouted and uncrossed her long slim legs. "Ah well, you are here now." The pout vanished and she smiled as if seeing me again had been all she wanted in the world.

For me, the next few days were almost unalloyed delight. Nicole was everything any man could have wanted, and I think I was nearer being in love than I had been since I was seventeen. The only disappointment was that I couldn't spend all the time with her; the afternoons she insisted she needed to herself.

I had told Francoise that I would want my room for two or three nights, but she made no difficulties about my keeping it longer. Indeed, I thought she seemed pleased, and she gave me a knowing little smile.

When I asked Nicole how long she could stay, she only shrugged and said there was no hurry. I had never questioned her about her personal affairs, any more than she had asked me about mine, but she had told me that she was divorced, and apparently she could afford to be independent. If I hadn't felt as I did about her, I might have considered her money in a different light.

I had come to St. Bernard to look into the possibilities for a discreet operation involving the tourists who would start arriving there in another two or three months. There might be richer pickings in the

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bigger towns like Perpignan and Biarritz, but also there were more police and more people with suspicious minds. St. Bernard, I reckoned, was safer. Which only shows how mistaken I could be.

During those wonderful few days, I neglected my professional affairs woefully. Indeed, I hardly ever thought about them, and when I did I dismissed them from my mind in favor of present pleasures. I knew my idyll with Nicole couldn't last, and I had no intention of spoiling it with sordid commercial considerations. Anyway, how could any man be expected to think of work when those eyes, sometimes dark, mysterious pools, sometimes sparkling with mischief, were gazing into his? I didn't even try.

Once we drove out into the country a few miles from St. Bernard, and another time over into Spain by the pilgrims' route up the Val des Neiges. Nicole seemed fascinated by the old road. I couldn't see why—it was rough and narrow and nothing like as attractive scenically as many of the other Pyrenean passes. At the foot of the valley some four miles from St. Bernard, there was a half derelict hamlet beyond which the road climbed past a big, isolated house toward the summit of the pass. The house had all the appearances of wealth and I asked Nicole if she knew who lived there.

She gave me a strange look. "My uncle," she said. "His name is Raoul Chatrier. He used to be a wine shipper in Bordeaux—he is a very wealthy man."

"I didn't know any of your family lived round here," I told her.

She shrugged. "Only him. I do not see him very often—he is not *sympathique*."

That was all I ever heard about her relationship to M. Chatrier.

The next morning she told me she had to drive to Biarritz to see her lawyer and visit her bank. She didn't like leaving me even for so short a time, but it was necessary for her to go, and we would make up for it later. I decided that I would spend the morning checking the details of certain projects I was considering. So far they were vague, but I had hopes of them.

It was just after eleven and I was walking down a quiet little street which runs off the Rue de la Citadelle near the old gate when I saw Nicole. At first I wasn't sure it was she. She was in deep shadow and her back was half turned to me, but then she moved and my doubts vanished. There was no mistaking that perfect profile.

I was shocked. There was no reason why she shouldn't be there,

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except that she had told me she must go to Biarritz, and I had gone with her to her car and seen her drive away only half an hour ago. Biarritz was well over twenty miles away—she couldn't possibly have driven there, attended to her business, and returned already. Also, she wasn't alone, there was a man with her. It was Marcel, the waiter from the Hotel Marais.

Something about the way they were standing made it clear that theirs was no chance meeting between a waiter and a guest at the hotel where he worked. Her hand was resting lightly on his sleeve, not to restrain him but as if she had to touch him. It seemed to me that there was something imploring about the gesture—and that shocked me more.

It wasn't simply the realization that, even for those few days, I wasn't the only man in Nicole's life. Nor that she had lied to me about going to Biarritz. Men and women deceive each other in little things all the time, and she owed me nothing. I don't think it was even jealousy—not in the conventional sense, anyway. More it was outrage that she—an intelligent, sophisticated woman—could see anything in an obvious, sullen little creep like Marcel.

No wonder he lingered at her table whenever he could. The last few evenings, Francoise had kept a close watch on him and last night she had led Nicole to my table in her own part of the dining room. There had been no indication that Nicole minded, or perhaps I had been too blind to see it, but I had noticed Marcel eyeing her moodily as he waited on other tables. It had even amused me.

I turned and walked away up the street, angry, resentful, and more than a little humiliated. I told myself that if this had happened with any other woman I would have laughed and written both it and her off to experience. But it wasn't any other woman, it was Nicole, and she had ditched me for Marcel. Well, if that was what she wanted, she was a free agent and I couldn't blame her for using the assets nature had given her. She must have men falling over her wherever she went.

And I had to admit that there was a certain ironic justice in the situation. I was hoist with my own petard. Half my life had been devoted to deceit in one form or another—who was I to complain if the biter had been bitten?

I knew Nicole had been to St. Bernard before. She might even have stayed at the Marais. Was that when she had first met Marcel?

I walked back to where my car was parked, got into it, and drove a long way out into the country . . .

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Perhaps Nicole went to Biarritz, after all. I didn't see her again until she came into the bar when I was having a drink there before dinner. The barman had departed after serving me and I was alone.

"Good evening, *cheri*," her familiar voice murmured just behind me. She leaned over and kissed my left ear lightly.

"Hello," I said in as neutral a voice as I could manage. Even that wasn't easy.

She came round in front of me, pouting a little. "You do not sound very enthusiastic, *cheri*." She looked even more ravishing than usual and I wondered if it was for my benefit or Marcel's. Worse, perhaps she had come to me from him.

"I'm sorry," I said. "You look particularly lovely this evening."

"Do I, darling?" She must have heard the same thing a thousand times before, but the compliment seemed to please her. I suppose no woman minds how many times she is told she is lovely. She sat on the sofa beside me and caressed my hand with her fingers. They were pale-skinned and slender, the nails meticulously shaped and varnished. "I wanted to look as nice as I could for you this evening."

"Why especially this evening?" I asked.

Her eyes looked into mine. "I will tell you later," she said softly.

She didn't want a drink, so I finished mine quickly and we went in to dinner together. Francoise was waiting just inside the dining-room door, and she showed us to a table by a window where she would wait on us herself.

Every few minutes, Marcel looked across and glared. I couldn't have cared less, and as far as I could see Nicole ignored him, too. I resisted the temptation to tell her I had seen her that morning or ask her how Biarritz had been. What she did when she wasn't with me was her own concern. But that wasn't the real reason for my saying nothing—I didn't want to risk spoiling what might be a rather special evening.

After dinner we went for a leisurely stroll. The main street, which a few hours ago had been busy with shoppers, was almost deserted, and most of the shops were in darkness.

"You were going to tell me something," I reminded Nicole.

She smiled a private little smile. "Later, darling," she said. "First I must go out for a little time."

"Tonight?" I exclaimed. It was already past nine-thirty and night comes early in St. Bernard.

"I am afraid so. I will not be very long."

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It was on the tip of my tongue to ask her where she had to go at that hour, but I stopped myself.

"You will wait for me?" she said.

"Of course I will."

"Thank you, *cheri*. You do not know how much that means to me." Her arm in mine pressed a little harder.

I saw Nicole drive away and returned to the bar. It was crowded, mostly with local people talking French too fast for me to follow it, and after a while I retreated to my room. I know few places more calculated to make you feel out of things than a roomful of people talking a language you can't understand.

I lay on my bed reading. I read a great deal, and at that time I was about halfway through *Vanity Fair*. I have always liked Thackeray.

By eleven-thirty I was beginning to wonder what had happened to Nicole. She had said she wouldn't be long, and already she had been gone over an hour and a half. I was starting to be concerned when there was a tap on my door. I went to answer it and found Francoise on the landing.

"There is the telephone for you, M. Davies," she told me.

"Me?" I said.

"But yes, M'sieur."

The only telephone for guests at the Marais was the one on the reception desk, and I followed Francoise downstairs to the lobby. She disappeared diplomatically.

"Is that you, *cheri?*" It was Nicole.

"Yes," I said. "Where are you?"

"I had to come to see my uncle. The one whose house we passed the other day. And now my car will not start. My uncle is very old, he cannot drive at night. Darling, can you come and fetch me?"

"Yes, of course I will," I told her. "I'll be there in a quarter of an hour."

"Oh, thank you, Jon." She sounded distraught and I wondered how long she had spent struggling to start the car.

I assured her again that I wouldn't be long, and put down the phone.

Somewhere behind the curtain which separated the reception desk from the working part of the hotel, Francoise was going for Marcel. She was speaking too fast for me to catch most of what she said, but the gist was clear enough. Hearing the phone click, she came out.

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I explained that Mme. Fouquet's car had broken down and I was going to fetch her.

"Ah, *quel dommage*," she said sympathetically.

"You won't lock us out?"

"*Mais non, M'sieur.*"

I thanked her, went out to my Citroen, and climbed in. The engine started first time.

It took me less than two minutes to reach the fork where the side road up the Val des Neiges turned off. I was thankful that Nicole and I had come that way before—at least I knew where the house was and wouldn't have to spend time looking for it.

The little hamlet was like a place of the dead. No light showed and nothing moved. Beyond it, the road began climbing steeply along a ledge above the valley. The Citroen's headlights, carving a tunnel of light ahead, accentuated the darkness on each side.

Another two miles, I told myself, perhaps a little more. Presumably there would be lights showing in the house—but if I drove past it, turning wouldn't be easy. In any case, it was no road for speeding. There were sharp bends and the surface was rough, holed in places and crumbling at the edges.

Even so, I nearly missed the house. There was no light showing, nor was there any sign of Nicole's car. But she would have driven it off the road and nearer the house, I thought. Parking the Citroen, I took my flashlight from the shelf and climbed out.

A short drive led from the road to the house, and I walked up it, the flashlight throwing a wavering beam on the gravel surface. I could just make out formal gardens with a good many shrubs. There was still no sign of Nicole's car. Nor was there when I looked round the back of the house.

My first thought was that she must have got it to start after all, and driven back to the town without waiting for me. That idea didn't survive long—there was only one road back and I hadn't met a single vehicle of any sort.

All right, I had been stood up. It hadn't happened to me for a long time, and I didn't like it, but it wasn't the end of the world. All I had to do was drive back to the hotel and forget about tonight.

But where was Nicole now? And why had she gone to so much trouble? If she didn't like my company, she could have made it clear without setting up this elaborate charade. It didn't make sense, this adolescent sort of ruse wasn't in character.

Cold fingers seemed to be touching my spine and something un-

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pleasant was happening to the hairs on the back of my neck. I shone my light on the nearest windows. They were shuttered. So were all the others on the ground floor. Only those on the upper floors were not, and none of them was open. The house looked deserted. But there were curtains at those upper windows, and the lawn had been mown within the last few days. The flowerbeds, too, were trim and tended. *Not* an empty house, then. One whose owner was away?

Was that it? Had Nicole come here to see her uncle and found him away? Perhaps on holiday? But if so, why hadn't she come straight back to the Marais? And why hadn't she told me on the phone? Instead, she had implied that she had seen M. Chatrier with her story of his being too old to drive her back in the dark.

I started circling the house again. And this time I noticed something I had missed before when my attention was concentrated on the windows. A side door was open an inch or so. As far as I could see, there was no sign of its having been forced, but why should a door be open in a house whose owner—and, apparently, any staff —were away?

For a moment, I hesitated. There was nothing to be gained by my going in—better return to my car and drive back to the Hotel Marais and bed. Much better. But curiosity has always been one of my many failings, and that night it was greater even than my fear. After all, there was no one within miles. My nerves on edge, I pushed the door wider. Unoiled hinges shrieked in protest, and I stopped, ears straining for any sound of movement. There was nothing. I stepped inside and found myself in a sort of storeroom. Crossing it as silently as I could, I opened a door in the opposite wall, crossed the kitchen to which it led, and by way of a third door came to a big hall.

Something on the floor glittered in the light of my torch, and I stooped to pick it up. It was a brooch, and what had glittered was a large diamond. For several seconds I stared at it, fascinated. Then I came to my senses. I didn't know what was going on, but this was noplace for me. With only the smallest pang of regret, I dropped the brooch and almost ran back to my car. Within half an hour I was in bed.

Once upon a time, hot croissants were the glory of the French breakfast. Nowadays, when you can get them, they usually come cold and solid. But the Marais was old-fashioned and those Francoise put in front of me the next morning were delicious.

There was no sign of Nicole, nor of her car. Francoise said she

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hadn't returned last night and her bed hadn't been slept in. She had gone, and it didn't take a lot of brains to work out what she had been up to. She, alone or with Marcel, had robbed the big house and framed me. They must have planned the whole operation together, right from her picking me out as a potential fall guy in the bar of the hotel in Luchon. Our drive up the Val des Neiges had been part of the plot—to ensure that I knew the whereabouts of the house. Very likely Nicole had dropped the brooch deliberately, counting on my picking it up and keeping it.

She had used me, set me up, and I was hurt. Particularly my pride. But I would get over it, and in the meantime I could congratulate myself on a lucky escape. I had seen the trap in time and got out before the police arrived. But it must have been a very close thing.

"Is Marcel about this morning?" I asked Francoise the next time she came to my table.

She gave me a curious look. "Marcel? *Non, M'sieur.* Do you want to see him?"

"No," I said. "I just wondered." Francoise had given me the impression that Marcel wasn't her favorite topic of conversation at the moment and I let the matter drop. Instead I asked, "Has Mme. Fouquet stayed here before?"

"*Oui, M'sieur,*" she answered flatly. "Two times before this."

She went to attend to a pair of middle-aged Englishwomen at a table across the room, and two minutes later the roof fell in. The police arrived. There were three of them, two in plain clothes and one, younger and very tough-looking, in uniform. They told Francoise they wanted to talk to the Englishman, M. Davies.

She passed the message on to me, looking anxious and slightly apologetic, although what she had to apologize for I had no idea. At her suggestion, we went into the bar, which was deserted at that time in the morning and had doors which could be closed. The policemen spoke very little English, and when Francoise offered to stay to act as interpreter they agreed with obvious relief.

Their approach was polite, almost formal. Would I tell them where I had been between eleven-thirty and twelve-thirty last night?

"Why?" I asked.

Last night, they explained, there had been a robbery at a house seven kilometers from St. Bernard. The owners, M. and Mme. Chatrier, were away on holiday in Sardinia. The housekeeper was also away, and the burglary had been reported on the telephone this

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morning by a caller who had forgotten to give her name before she rang off. Perhaps I knew the house?

Forgotten! I thought. Like hell. But at least Nicole had given me a few hours to cover my tracks, and I was grateful to her for that. Now my best course was to tell the truth—some of it, anyway—and I agreed that I did know the house. Or where it was.

"Ah," the eldest policeman said.

I explained that I had once driven past it with a friend, a French lady, and she had pointed it out to me and mentioned that it belonged to a M. Chatrier. Was much taken?

As the owners were away, they told me, it was impossible to say exactly, but it was believed to include a good deal of silver, some jewelry, and other *objets d'art.*

"Why have you come to me?" I asked with what I hoped was a convincing blend of bewilderment and indignation. Privately, I was thinking with relief that I had still been wearing my driving gloves when I was inside the house. If they had found my prints there, it would have been awkward, to put it mildly.

"We have received information," the senior one answered.

I was damned sure they had. What was more, I knew who had given it to them. Nicole.

Apparently, there had been a number of similar robberies in Southwest France recently, the last of them at a house near Luchon only a week ago.

"I believe you were in Luchon then, M'sieur?"

I agreed I was, but I knew nothing of any robbery. "This M. Chatrier, is he an old man?" I asked.

No, the senior detective said, both M. and Mme. Chatrier were young.

There wasn't an old relative staying with them?

"*Non.*"

They frowned. At least, the two in plain clothes did. The uniformed one merely looked impassive and, if anything, slightly tougher than before. Clearly they suspected that I was deliberately wasting time. And they still wanted to know where I had been between half past eleven and half past twelve last night.

"I had a call from a friend," I told them. "Her car wouldn't start, and I went to fetch her."

They looked as if they didn't believe me. It was annoying, especially as it was true, but I couldn't really blame them.

What was the lady's name? they asked.

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I hesitated. Nicole might have behaved extremely badly, but she was far too lovely for me to want to be responsible for sending her to jail.

It was then that the second bombshell exploded.

"You do not have to lie for me, Jon darling," Francoise said. She turned to the senior of the policemen. "M. Davies is a gentleman, M'sieur, and he doesn't want to tell you for my sake. He was with me last night."

I gaped at her, my mouth open. I couldn't help it. For a hotel to try to provide good service for its guests was one thing, lying to the police was another, and it seemed to me that Francoise was carrying the concept of service to an extreme. Nevertheless, I was grateful. She had rescued me from a very awkward predicament, and it would have been churlish of me to contradict her. I had no intention of being so discourteous. Particularly as doing so would put me right back in trouble.

"You look surprised, M. Davies," the policeman remarked curiously.

"No," I assured him, speaking with difficulty. "No, M'sieur." That was the first lie I had told that morning.

They said they would like to search my room. Francoise didn't seem very keen on the idea, but I knew there was nothing for them to find, while a refusal would only antagonize them and make them even more suspicious than they were already. So I agreed, hoping that they would be impressed by my readiness to cooperate. To add to the atmosphere of goodwill, I suggested they look in my car, too. They promised, with very straight faces, that they would.

The search took some time. They were very thorough, but eventually they left.

"Why on earth did you tell them I was with you?" I asked Francoise as soon as they had gone. "It was very good of you, but you were taking a hell of a risk."

She smiled.

Marcel didn't appear that evening, and the next morning Francoise's father went to the police to report him missing. Francoise seemed upset, and I supposed that waiters were hard to find.

They found him, all right—two days later in a wood near the foot of the Val des Neiges, stabbed twice through the heart. According to the pathologist, he had been murdered sometime on the night of the robbery.

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The police had made it clear that they wanted me to stay in St. Bernard for the time being, and by chance I was coming down the stairs when two of them came to break the news to Francoise.

My French was better than the other three had supposed, and I heard one of the two tell her that he was afraid they had some bad news.

"What is it?" she said. Even where I was, I could hear the apprehension in her voice.

"Marcel, your husband, is dead, Madame."

That was the third bombshell. I was so startled that I began to say something. I stopped almost at once, but Francoise had heard me. She looked up, and suddenly, in that split second, I saw the truth. She, not Nicole, had killed Marcel. He had had nothing to do with the robberies—Nicole had planned and carried them out on her own—but he had been Nicole's lover. His conduct had humiliated Francoise in her own home, and she was too proud and too possessive to tolerate it. I had heard them quarrelling when I put the phone down after Nicole's call. They must have gone on after I went to find her, and Francoise had stabbed him.

That was why she had told the police she was with me that night: my alibi was also hers. I knew the truth now, and there was nothing I could do about it.

I knew something else as well. Uncle George had been right.

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Nina tried to forgive Hal's sighing. Four kids under six was hard—and Hal was the kind who washed the tops of ceiling-light fixtures because he couldn't stand knowing the dirt was there. That kind of guy married to her? She supposed she could be a better housekeeper, but she didn't see how unless it was the most important thing in the world to her. And it wasn't.

Jan Gleiter lives in Chicago and is a writer of books (biographies and poetry for children), short films and video, musical comedy, and test questions, as well as a reader of mysteries, most avidly those of Tony Hillerman . . .

THE TOYBOX

by JAN GLEITER

Hal Janek's wife didn't understand him.

"Not Michigan. Michigan City. Indiana. Not even the same state." Hal cupped a hand around the mouthpiece of the phone. "I've got to leave now. This lead just came in and, don't say it, I can't just call the Michigan City cops. I gotta talk to somebody, so I gotta go myself. And listen—" his voice dropped even lower than the *sotto voce* he'd been using at the risk of driving Nina completely mad "—don't mention this to anyone. Not anyone. It's looking like someone in the Department, in the damn precinct, and I don't want anyone knowing where I've gone. So call in sick for me tomorrow."

He sighed. "And, Nina honey, sweetie, please shovel out the house before I get back. I really can't take it much longer. It's like living in a toybox. A baby giant's toybox. A very messy baby giant's toybox."

Nina Janek was balancing the phone on her shoulder, trying to talk to her husband while swaying rhythmically. The swaying was occasioned by a three-month-old, almost asleep baby. With one ear,

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she listened for sounds of dangerous mayhem from the living room. With the other, she tried to keep up with Hal.

"But you didn't pack anything. How can you go to, uh, Michigan City without clean socks?"

"How can I go *with* clean socks? It's not like the laundry ever gets done. Look, Nina, I'll buy some socks. And I'll buy a toothbrush. I'll clean out the savings account and buy socks and a toothbrush." He sighed again.

Nina tried to forgive the sighing. Four kids under six was hard—and Hal was the kind who washed the tops of ceiling-light fixtures because he couldn't stand knowing the dirt was there. That kind of guy married to her? She supposed she could be a better housekeeper, but she didn't see how unless it was the most important thing in the world to her. And it wasn't.

"I gotta go, Nina," he was saying. "I'll be back around noon."

"Okay. I'll clean up. I'll really clean up—I promise. And I'll call in sick for you. But I need the car tomorrow. I can't take four kids to the doctor on the bus."

"I know. I'll drop it off in front. Mitch is going up with me, so he'll drive."

"Just be careful. Hal?"

"Yeah, I know. Love you, too."

Frank Donati, gazing out the second-story window near his desk, saw his ex-partner stride across the parking lot. Why'd he always walk like that, anyway? Chin down, shoulders hunched against a nonexistent wind, bulldozing through life. It drove Donati crazy. Just as it had surprised him that Janek had proved so agile back in their years of riding together.

So far there was no indication that Janek was adding two to the requisite two and coming up with Donati strapped into the chair. But he was looking. And one thing Donati knew about Janek was that once he started looking, he didn't stop. So Donati would have to stop him.

He didn't like the idea—mostly because he didn't like the aftermath of murder. He didn't mind doing it—he enjoyed it in a way—but he didn't like having to watch what he said and did later. After tonight, he'd have to pretend shock and ignorance about one more. Or—unless he could find Janek alone in his kitchen and kill him silently, which seemed unlikely—several more.

Donati had been lucky the time before. The boy had slept through

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his mother's messy dying. So Donati had walked out and left the kid, who was undoubtedly better off with his aunt wherever it was he was now. Michigan City, that was it.

Nina Janek bent over the crib, lowering herself and the baby by inches until he was resting on the duck-patterned mattress. Sliding her hands out from under him, she tiptoed to the door. A sudden clutching at her leg stopped her.

She leaned over and detached the cat's claws from her pants. It wasn't really such a bad cat. It left the kids alone and she and Hal, wearing thick socks, had gotten somewhat used to its ambush.

It was ominously quiet downstairs. In the dining room, Tommy was applying nailpolish to his grubby three-year-old fingers. The bottle had spilled and a dusty-rose pool was spreading across the table. Jane was feeding Angie cereal out of the box.

"I saved Angie's life," said Jane with a dark look toward her mother. "She was almost all the way up the stairs and she would have crashed down and broken her neck because you didn't close the baby gate."

"Thank you, Jane. I'll do a better job of keeping it closed. Now concentrate on saving *Tommy's* life by never taking my nailpolish off the shelf again—never. Please."

"Okay," said Jane. "Are we ever going to have dinner?"

Outside, Frank Donati drove by in a car as bland and characterless as the one Janek had parked outside his house. So he was home. Probably listening to his wife complain about something. Donati didn't like Nina. Liked her less than he liked most women, which was scarcely at all. All that curly hair. Her opinions. He'd been to a party at their house before the first baby was born. A girl, yeah. And he remembered the house—as he remembered everything.

There was a living room with a lot of oak woodwork—Nina probably thought it was quaint—and an oak staircase leading up to the second floor. A dining room, then a big kitchen with a back door. Glass in the door. There was a bathroom off the kitchen and, next to it, another set of stairs that went up to a bedroom. He wished he knew whose bedroom. He'd watch the house once it was dark and find out.

Nina sat crosslegged on the floor in the boys' room, watching Tommy, surrounded by blocks, constructing what he claimed was

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a city. Jane, yanking a mountain goat, a Raggedy Andy, and a duck from under her T-shirt, announced that she had given birth to triplets. Angie was dumping books from the bookcase onto the floor. "Okay," Nina said, trying to sound firm. "Time to pick up this stuff."

Tommy rocked back on his heels, surprised. "Why? Is company coming over?" He obligingly dumped two blocks in their box before being distracted by several of his favorite trucks under the crib.

A few blocks away, Frank Donati used a drive-thru to get a hamburger and coffee. He ate in the car in the parking lot. He'd wait as long as he had to. He'd made sure his nosey neighbor saw him go into his house and made sure she didn't see him come back out and walk to the grocery-store lot where he'd left his car. There was no one else to know he wasn't home. Far be it from him to be saddled with a wife, or anyone else wanting anything from him.

He'd driven his car from the grocery-store lot out to the long-term parking lot at the airport. Within a few minutes, he'd spotted the one he'd switch to, common and boring. The woman who parked it was carrying an overnight bag. Donati waited until she'd disappeared and pulled into a nearby spot. When she came back from her trip, she'd find her car in nearly the same spot she'd parked it. Who noticed exactly what spot they parked in? Who cared if she did?

He hunched down and drank the coffee. No reason to think. Everything that could be planned was planned. No point in thinking about anything else until he had to. His mind went back to Janek, slamming down the phone all those years ago and shouting across his desk.

"The Larson woman is dead! I *told* you we should have had her watched, Frank! She was our last blasted lead on those securities! *Damn!*"

Donati crumpled the paper cup. Well, he wouldn't have to listen to Janek any more. Wouldn't have to get itchy with irritation over his sanctimony or the way he walked. He didn't see why Janek had started in on the Larson case again, anyway, or why he'd never really dropped it. But he didn't plan to ask. He'd just do him, and whoever else he had to do, and get out fast.

Nina, having tucked Tommy into his bed and told the obligatory story, had gotten the girls into their room in the front. Sitting by the window in the dark, she tried not to hurry through "Froggie Went a' Courting" and "Begin the Beguine." Down the street, a car

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pulled slowly away from the curb. She watched it turn the corner and disappear from sight, wondering how much cleaning she could do before she fell into bed with exhaustion.

Donati sat in the stolen car, half a block away. The room upstairs in the back must belong to a child. That light had gone out first. Now the front-room light had gone out. Not ideal, but at least he knew where he'd be going.

He turned on the ignition and drove slowly off, parking again on a quiet side street three blocks away. He got out, wearing jogging shorts and a sweatshirt. He was built much like Janek. Coming up the walk from the alley to Janek's back door, he would look to any wakeful neighbor like Janek returning from a late run. The poor bastard always had to do his running at odd times, anyway.

Donati didn't need to hide a weapon, just the glass-cutting equipment. It fit into the zippered pocket on the front of his sweatshirt. He would find the weapon he needed at the house—a weapon that could be traced with no danger to him. He knew Janek kept his service revolver in a locked cabinet in the dining room. He even knew where he kept the key. Too high for children to reach, even children on chairs. But not too high for Donati. And there had been a well stocked knife rack by the sink. He'd use a knife if he could. Knives were quiet, and they did the job.

Nina sat up. The baby was whimpering. Go back to sleep, she thought, please go back to sleep. It's not time yet, baby. Her eyes ached with fatigue.

She lay back down. It was quiet.

Donati slipped his hand through the cut-out portion of the glass and turned the lock. The door opened silently. Inside the kitchen, he paused to let his eyes adjust. Yes, there was the knife rack. He selected a medium-sized blade with a handle that felt good in his hand. His heart was thudding with excitement.

He found the cabinet where Janek kept his revolver and tried the door. It was locked, as he'd expected, but the key wasn't where he'd thought it would be. He cursed soundlessly. He would have preferred the security of having that reassuring weight tucked into his waistband. But he wasn't about to quit over a small change in plans. He wasn't leaving with Janek's back door showing the unmistakable signs of a break-in. Depending on the knife just made the element of surprise that much more important.

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First Janek. That should be easy, with him having the disadvantage of being sound asleep—even if Nina did something besides scream, which he doubted. Then Nina. Then—well, maybe that would be all that was necessary. Donati started up the back stairs.

Nina swam toward consciousness. Something wasn't right. Ah, of course, Hal was away. But was that all? The baby usually woke up about now for a feeding. But maybe he would sleep through the night. He had done it once.

The nightlight by the bed cast a dim glow over the sleeping child. The rest of the room was dark. Donati could see where the shades on the window stopped. He glanced around the room, found the door that led to the adjoining bedroom. It was closed.

The infant thrashed and kicked violently at his blanket. Donati froze. Parents responded to children's cries in the night. His fingers tightened on the knife.

A sudden pain drove itself into his calf. Donati reached down blindly with his free hand. Snatching at fur, he tossed the creature away from him, and as he jumped back toward the door a toy truck slid away under his weight. His knee hit the floor—crashing into the sharp corner of a wooden block.

When he lurched to his feet, he saw Nina standing in the doorway. He had to take care of Janek first—he would deal with her later. Pushing past her, his calf and knee throbbing, he found the bed in the middle room empty.

"Where's Hal?" he demanded, confusion giving way to rage. Nina didn't answer. She had something in her hand. Donati ducked, some sixth sense working overtime.

The baseball bat missed by an inch. He raised the knife, but Nina was ready to swing again. She held the bat with both hands, elbows bent, waiting. She hadn't made a sound.

When she swung next time, Donati ducked again, but Nina had aimed lower this time and the bat caught him on the shoulder. The pain was sickening. His left arm hung uselessly at his side. He couldn't get the knife past her reach with the bat. He made a grab for the bat, dropping the knife, but it was coming at him again and he had to pull back.

He whirled and raced for the front stairs. He knew she'd follow him, come racing down behind him. He'd spin in the darkness, grab the bat, pull it out of her hands, and beat her head in with it. He leaped down the stairs, already hearing her skull crack . . .

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The neighborhood in which the Janeks' house stood was generally a quiet one. Sirens in the night that broke the stillness and passed on were ignored as best they could be. But the presence of an ambulance and three police cars was sufficiently out of the ordinary to bring neighbor after neighbor, in varying stages of dress, hurrying to the scene.

The ambulance stood in the street outside the house, its whirling light stabbing the darkness. The medics were loading a stretcher, the sheet pulled all the way up.

Inside, a police lieutenant talked quietly on the phone. "Yeah, broke his neck. Must have died instantly. No, no charges. The guy broke in. Besides, what'm I gonna charge her with? Keeping a baby gate closed?"

DETECTIVERSE

IT'S ALL RELATIVE

by ARDA M. HAENSZEL

My wife has a brother who just robbed a bank—
He's Mexico-bound on the lam.
Her father's last tax form's been audited and
He's in trouble with old Uncle Sam.

Her nephew's in court for an arson attempt—
It's almost too much to endure.
I'm very upset at this state of affairs—
My in-laws are outlaws for sure.

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a ***NEW*** short story by

STRINGFELLOW FORBES

On Bonniwell Street, Lacey saw the pastry shop for the first time. It was the coffee in the window that stopped her, though the window itself was unusual. All of it but a gold-edged rectangle of glass at eye height was enameled shiny black on the inside, and within this framed open glass was a little still life: blue-and-white-linen napkin spread out like a tablecloth, embossed white-china plate with a danish roll on it, and blue-and-white-china cup filled with coffee. A printed card beside the cup said Continental Pastries.

A story about the seduction of addiction, those who deal in it and are victimized by it, from a writer whose style and substance is becoming an addiction of ours . . .

PASTRIES

by STRINGFELLOW FORBES

Lacey Furay had taught herself not to want things. She used what came to hand, and because she had this quality of being satisfied and because she had style, which after all is only a matter of eye and not of investment, she led a life that many envied—living in a tidy, small apartment that was almost downtown, working with beautiful jewelry in Mr. Simon's store all day, sometimes helping with sets for the civic theater at night, browsing for antiques at Sam Coon's shop and in the local junk stores on weekends. She had men friends who took her out, but she had never let one of them move in with her and she didn't feel the need of marrying. Lacey was twenty-eight, just the age her mother had been when her husband left, and she wasn't going to go through that.

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After her husband deserted her, Lacey's mother had spent the rest of her days yearning. She had one photograph of him, and though she drank to it and spent hours regarding it she didn't talk about him. Lacey's loss was not acknowledged. Living on a small inheritance from her family, Mrs. Furay dragged Lacey from rented room to crumbling apartment to cheap hotel.

The nicest place they ever had was in a low-income housing development. There her mother suddenly came out of her cloud of cigarette smoke and bourbon fumes to develop pride. She became too proud to be unemployed among the barely employed poor. She curled her hair, remembered where her nice clothes were packed among the worn boxes that had accompanied them through all their moves, shortened the hems, let out the waists, and got a job in a store, selling cosmetics. Lacey was twelve when this happened and she grew into herself in that one year her mother worked, keeping house inexpertly but developing a liking for neatness, and achieving it by hiding her mother's soiled clothes and overflowing ashtrays, smoothing the surfaces of the beds, and straightening the lampshades. She learned to cook simple dinners and she was never lonely during the long afternoons, only too grateful that she was left by herself to wander through the sunny rooms and to manage things in her own way.

Though she didn't talk about it much, her girl friends at school knew that Lacey could do these things and, seeing her serenity at an age when they were all wildly uncertain, they envied her. Then her mother got a raise and the higher salary added to the monthly inherited income disqualified them for the development and they had to move out. Back in the kind of dim apartment that was all her mother could afford, Lacey learned not to want what she couldn't have and Mrs. Furay found again the pleasures of idleness. After that, she was rarely out of her satin loungerobe—a relic of the department-store days—and she died of her dissipations seven years later. Lacey had her own job by then and she soon fell into the peaceful routines she had known that year when she was twelve.

On the morning of the day she found the pastry shop, Lacey slept late because of a dream she often had. Though her radio came on to wake her up, she made of the music a background for the meeting with her father that she'd been seeing over and over in this dream for years. Because someone had once asked her if her name came from the French—was it originally Fauré or something like

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that?—Lacey had begun long ago to imagine her father was a continental businessman, unable to return to his family because he was so necessary to his European company.

She had taught herself his history and learned his standards. In the dream, she waited for him, sitting in a sidewalk cafe in Paris, eating pastry, pulling it apart into little bits as she always did with her food. Whatever Lacey ate she toyed with, tossing it aside as if she had no interest in it, and then at the last minute becoming very busy and finishing every scrap, leaving a littered but essentially empty plate. All her friends claimed that she ate like a peckish hummingbird and they were amazed she was plump, ascribing it to genes.

It was part of her strategy of not wanting things that she accepted her heaviness, but in the dream she was a little worried that her father would mind it, this first time of meeting her.

Plane trees lined the street where the cafe was and she knew now that they resembled sycamores and weren't hung with tiny green airplanes, as she used to think when she was a child and first found the word in a book. Her father approached, weaving through the closely packed chairs of the crowded cafe. Over the years, she had allowed him to become a little grey, a little stocky. Now he dressed more casually than when she was younger—perhaps he was easier with himself. After all, he was now head of his company, having risen to the top, and was coasting to early retirement. He wanted to spend more time on his yacht. He wanted to console his daughter for the years of absence while he worked in his important—and very sensitive and difficult—continental job. He had invited her to meet him here and she would sail with him to the Greek Islands. He wore a black-suede jacket, dove-grey pants, and smooth, soft shoes. People looked at him as he passed between the tables. He recognized Lacey by instinct and his eyes lighted. Watching him come, she did not smile. He mustn't think her too glad to see him, too ready to forgive.

By the time she reached the beginnings of her cold smile of welcome in the dream, the music on the radio stopped, a newscast came on, and Lacey suddenly knew the time. Eight-thirty.

She had her routines for mornings like this: no breakfast, no time wasted looking for clean underclothes, smudgy eyemakeup so she didn't have to be careful, one-piece knitted dress, bedspread flung over tangled sheets. Working quickly at traffic lights, she would put her hair up in the car.

She sprayed on a little mousse, swept the dripping bottle and all

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her brushes and tubes into a drawer, pushing spilled blusher over the edge after them, and took a last look around. The apartment pleased her and she always left it neat. Her father would have liked it, too. He lived simply but with niceties. Sam Coon sometimes had antique furniture she could afford and she was gifted at picking over the things in junk shops and coming up with something interesting or beautiful. She hoped, though, that people wouldn't open the closets and drawers.

The glory of Lacey's apartment was the ferns. With them she took infinite trouble, humidifying and feeding, turning and alternating positions for sun exposure. They filled a bay window in the bedroom and graced the corners everywhere. In the early light they were luminous green, a presence of life.

Coat trailing from one shoulder, she went to the car, an old red Citroen. Today it wouldn't start.

And that was how she happened to walk to town, hurrying, churning her heavy hips, brushing her hair and working with combs and clips as she went.

It was spring—there were cold sunlight and bud-flushed branches. She walked a long downhill path through the streets to the black iron bridge where the river rushed over stones in a deep ravine. Her steps on the bridge seemed to pound, she had an unpleasant sense of vibration, of drumming. Turning left onto Bonniwell Street, she was only three blocks from the store. Simon and Son was a jewelry store so old-fashioned it had survived to become chic. Old Mr. Simon was the Son of the title and Lacey and Lem the watchmaker were his only employees. Though they both claimed to each other that Lacey's exotic hairstyles were an outrage, the men secretly felt that she was a fine contemporary note in the old-fashioned store.

On Bonniwell Street, she saw the pastry shop for the first time. It was the coffee in the window that stopped her, though the window itself was unusual. All of it but a gold-edged rectangle of glass at eye height was enameled shiny black on the inside, and within this framed open glass was a little still life: blue-and-white napkin spread out like a tablecloth, embossed white-china plate with a danish roll on it, and blue-and-white-china cup filled with coffee. A printed card beside the cup said *Continental Pastries*. They must have just set up the window because the coffee was steaming. Sun and breezes, moving shadows of bare branches, warmth with an edge to it of early morning in good weather all made her think of Paris, a city she had never seen, lodestone of her dreams. She wanted to be pastry-wise,

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to know one from the other, to eat them in style. Looking more carefully, she saw that the roll glowed with apricot and showed just a hint of something creamy. It was other-worldly, more fragile and layered of thinner flakes than any she had ever seen. She went inside.

The woman who served her was portly, with perfect skin and elaborately piled blonde hair. She spoke with an accent.

"Yes, modam?"

"Well, I—ah—" Faced now with the whole array of trays and trays of heaped pastries, Lacey lost her breath. I shouldn't, she thought. Just one, she thought.

"Like in the window," she said. "Is that apricot?"

"Iberian peach, modam."

"Iberian?"

"Where Europe reaches out to Africa. These come from La Suretta de Alcoy. They grow in the garden of the holy brothers there."

"And this dark one?"

"Raspberries from Languedoc, where they say *oc* instead of *oui*, you know? And these are loquat from— Well, you wouldn't know the name—a village in Italy that honors Marco Polo by growing his Chinese fruit."

"Oh." This woman knew places Lacey had never heard of and she spoke as if she had lived in all of them.

"I'll have the peach." Though Lacey wanted to say again the beautiful exotic word *Iberian,* her ignorance and the woman's knowledge of it made her simplify.

The woman smiled as if to herself and reached her fat, dimpled hand into the case. Her nails were rounded and shiny. She handled the paper and the bun as if she barely touched them, seeming to create a cushion of air that lifted and enfolded the miracle of butter and flour and let it drift into a palely striped paper bag. When the bag was on the counter, crisp, turned down across the top, the woman stood back and looked at Lacey. Lacey reached for it.

"Now you pay, *non?"*

"Oh, I'm sorry." Lacey laughed and fumbled in her handbag. "I almost forgot that. How much?"

"Thirty cents."

"Is that all?"

The woman smiled and her eyelids dropped a little. She seemed to consult within herself. "You pay thirty cents."

Walking the rest of the way with the little bag hanging from her

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fingers, Lacey thought of the dingy back room in Mr. Simon's shop where she took her breaks and sometimes ate her lunch. Lem always made coffee first thing in the morning and it would be ready when she got there, fresh and fragrant. It would steam like the coffee in the bakery window.

When she entered the shop, her eye fell on the china display and she picked up a Wedgwood cup and saucer as she passed through to the back. At lunchtime she would buy a linen napkin, she decided.

Late as she was, Lacey took her time. The bun was impossibly delicious. Surely even in France there is not such poignant flavor, such depth of sweetness, contrast of cream and tartness, light, breaking, melting crispness. She was ravished.

She told Mr. Simon she was buying the cup and saucer and, rinsing them, she cleared the end of a shelf to keep them on, spreading out a paper towel to keep it clean. Smoothing her hips, she thought that it was as if she had eaten nothing at all, really.

After that first morning, she had a new routine. Whatever the weather, she walked to town, stopping on Bonniwell Street to buy a pastry. The bakery woman never changed her manner, never gave any sign that Lacey was a regular customer. She always served her with the same composed, reflective half smile.

Lacey bought running shoes to walk to work in. She bought two linen napkins, one to use as a cloth, a small plate from the china stock, and a silver spoon, though she denied herself both sugar and cream. Eating the bun was completely satisfying and she needed almost nothing else all day.

Even so, her clothes seemed to grow uncomfortably tight and her steps on the iron bridge heavier. She bought a book on running, prised herself into a pair of jeans, and pushed herself every evening as far as a certain park bench, where she would rest and then stagger home, each step a heaving effort. The good weather broke and it was cold again. She bought new clothes for the running and a windbreaker.

Giving up the pastries began to seem necessary and she worried a lot about it. All the way down the hill and over the bridge, she would be deciding not to stop this time but her mind made excuses. It's raining today, it said, wait for good weather. It's too nice today, a perfect pastry day, it said. Iberia, it said, Languedoc. And then she would see the steaming cup in the window and she would go inside. She tried profiteroles, eclairs, batons, palmiers, and almond

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viennese, but her favorites were always the exquisite danish. The color of the stripes on the bags she was given matched the flavor, she found: if she chose plum, the stripes would be lavender; if raspberry, they were pink. Her morning ceremony of pastry and coffee attracted Mr. Simon's attention and she offered to include him, mentioning the low price, but he only waved his hand and turned away. He had his own early-morning routine of checking the safe and all the stock. Lem, who was a good watchmaker because he was finicky, complained that she was leaving crumbs.

June came and Lacey felt heavy and fat, in spite of running every night, now going far beyond the bench where she used to rest. When the public pool opened, she began to swim in the mornings before work. The water bleached her hair and the hot dryer gave it a manelike look she hated. She didn't have time now to put it up. She began to feel she was not herself.

In despair, she said to the bakery woman one day, "I must stop eating these. I'm getting a little—pudgy."

The woman, calm and immaculate in her swelled-out white uniform, almost smiled.

"If you are, it becomes you."

"Oh, no. I can't stand it. I must do something. Everything has gotten completely out of control."

"You should see my brother, he could help you," the woman said. There was a change in her. She stretched out her pink hand and held it in the air and her lidded eyes were benevolent.

The brother's place was around the corner, upstairs over a garage. It was a dark bare room with a smell of motor oil that rose through the floor. As much as the woman was round and fair, the brother was hunched and brown. He sat in his shirtsleeves, reading a smudged newspaper. The only furniture was the slatted folding chair on which he slouched, a tall packing crate, and a red cabinet on legs that looked old and battered—it was painted with elaborate scenes and shone with inlaid mother-of-pearl.

Lacey told him why she had come.

"You'll be wanting the speedy special then." The woman's accent was European but her brother spoke like an Irishman and was difficult to understand.

He went to the cabinet, hooking one dirty finger into his vest pocket for a key. His odors swam into the room as he moved, his lank straight hair fell onto his forehead as he bent to the keyhole.

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The cabinet, when he opened it, yawned black and somehow windy. Lacey wanted to run.

With a flourish, he turned, startling her as he flopped a black velvet cover onto the crate. Then, turning back, he brought out a slim carton and set it with ceremony on the cloth. It was a severe rectangle of white, tied with gold cord. A tiny green leaf on a section of cut stem stood up from under the bow knot.

"Forty dollars," he said.

"But—what's in it?"

"You're wanting to feel thinner, is it? With this, you'll love yourself while you eat anythin' you please. Think about it."

Lacey didn't have to think. She paid cash and picked up the box.

" 'It the bitty lif'—eat the little leaf"—she translated. " ' 'N then tuther'—and then the other."

She opened the box that night, laying aside the leaf and untying the gold cord. Held in an architectural framework of pristine cardboard was a single lozenge sealed in a bubble of plastic. She had thought she was buying a big supply of weight-loss pills and here was only one for her forty dollars. It was white and crystalline and on its surface was a richly molded raised letter *L*. It couldn't stand for Lacey, he hadn't known she was coming. Angry at the deception, filled with the dread of putting in her mouth an unknown thing, she opened the bubble and held the leaf in one hand, the lozenge in the other.

Biting the leaf from the stem, she tasted bitterness so sharp that her face contorted and she thrust the lozenge onto her tongue. It was bland and balmy, subduing the taste of the leaf, and the combination was pleasant. Thoughtfully, she drank the water she had prepared, and musingly she turned to the mirror on the inside of her closet door and smiled at herself, smiled to see the heavy fall of hair, the swell of hips, depth of navel, roundness of thigh, sinews above the anklebone. She lifted her breasts, crossed her arms, caressed her shoulders, and went smiling to bed, almost slumbering before she lay down. She dreamed of gardens and tall women, of a river in moonlight, of a house that was hers, a house of unending rooms she could occupy.

It was only in the morning when she approached the bakery that she realized what she had started. She would have to buy another lozenge for that night, she would have to pay forty dollars every day to the brother in the dark room over the garage.

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He had said she could eat anything, so that morning she bought two danish rolls, and at lunchtime she went to the main street and tried a new restaurant, ordering fried eggplant in a sauce of cream cheese, sour cream, and capers—and chocolate rum torte for desssert.

That night again, after eating the bitter leaf and the balmy lozenge, she admired her image in the mirror, turning, smoothing her own skin. She would have to go to the bank before she visited the brother tomorrow, but she could afford it, she decided. For as long as it took she would find the money. At this rate, she would be satisfied with her figure in a few more days.

By the next week, she felt comfortable in her clothes, but she had no thought of stopping the lozenges. They had done her so much good! She sold her car and got only three hundred dollars for it. She began using her savings to buy the lozenges, always only one at a time. When she passed the bakery at noon on her way to the room around the corner, the coffee in the window would be steaming. It never occurred to her to wonder how they did it.

Mr. Simon's son came home on a visit from New York.

"Well, well," he said to his father. "Who's this?"

Mr. Simon looked around. "You mean Lacey? It's just Lacey. The way she is now." He realized that she had changed and that he hadn't seen it before.

The son was named John. He took her out. He stroked her in the car and told her she was a sexy lady. "I am not!" Lacey was angry and wouldn't let him inside her apartment.

She met a man on the jogging track who talked to her every day and asked her where she lived and whether she liked children. His name was Josh, he sold computers, and he wanted her to meet him in the evenings so they could run together.

Mr. Simon asked her if she was interested in learning to do some of the buying, making trips to New York and Amsterdam.

Sam Coon at the antique shop turned up a rosewood bedside cabinet and let her have it on credit. Her landlord volunteered to put in new carpeting—as soon as she paid her rent, that is.

She promised to marry Josh. It frightened her, but she hoped she would really do it, so she said yes. None of the others had ever mentioned children and she couldn't get out of her mind an image of herself and Josh and a baby—a family, warm and safe. He bought her a ring at Simon and Son. John Simon stayed in the back room while they were in the store.

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All this time she was buying a lozenge every day, because she was afraid of stopping. They had come to seem good luck for her, so many nice things had happened since she began to take them.

Then one Friday, the man in the dark room refused her forty dollars. "This is a new business, luv, you cawn't expect me to keep to the introductory prices, now, can ye? We've gone up. That'll be a hundred and fifty. After all, we import these from the continent."

The word tripped in her mind all the associations of the dream and a hallucination of her father obscured her sight. He had never spoken to her, but now he said, "What is this, blackmail?"

"But, look," she argued with her father, "I'm slim, things are happening."

He shook his grey head with its short, practical haircut of a businessman. "You cannot have perfect freedom and perfect control. You must recognize the laws of nature."

She was angry with him, and for the first time she accused him. "What does that mean? And you have no right—you were never here, you are *not* here to help me."

"And yet, aren't you my daughter?" he said.

Something in her began to shake and she knew she would cry. "I made you up," she said to his fading figure, and the man before her now was the dirty, smirking seller of lozenges—of whom Lacey was afraid, as she was suddenly afraid of herself. Without speaking to him again, she left. I know how to diet, she thought, why am I worrying?

On Monday, she wrapped up her mother's pearls and sold them to Sam Coon, who didn't want to take them. This made her late for work, but she stopped and bought a danish and ate it furtively in the back room while Mr. Simon called to her from the shop. Crumbs dropped into her blouse, which felt stretched and barely held together by its buttons. She worked all day with grease on the front of her.

That noon, the dark little man told her the price had gone up again and the money from the pearls was not enough. "Ah," he said, "and isn't that just a shame? I've seen it happen before."

I'll bet, she thought to herself, but she wouldn't antagonize him.

"Would you be wantin' a bit of extra work, in the evenings like?"

"You mean you know of something?"

"It's my brother, just startin' up a night shift an' all."

"But I need the box tonight—can't you let me have it on credit?"

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"Maybe for that ring."

It was the diamond Josh had given her. It was halfway off her finger before she said, "No, I'll have to think about it. I'll come back."

During the afternoon, she found herself standing by the safe, holding a fold of tissue paper with a square-cut emerald inside. Suddenly it was as if the searing thought of what she intended to do crisped the paper to ash, igniting the jewel into a towering flame. She thrust it into her purse, said she had an errand uptown, took her break early, and went to the room over the garage.

The man only looked at her, waiting to see what solution she had found. The emerald in its fold of paper smoldered in her purse, which she clutched with both hands. Unable to open her throat, she could not speak.

"Come back, have you?" the man said.

"I've got—" Lacey hardly recognized her voice, it croaked so.

"Have you brought me something nice, then?" He was looking at the bag as if he saw green light flashing from long facets, as if he had watched her at the safe. He was almost laughing.

"Would you take my watch? It's gold."

Still looking at her, still amused, he shook his head.

Her fingers, paralyzed, would not release the top of the bag. The emerald would be back in the safe in the morning when Mr. Simon looked for it. "You said something about work?" Lacey said.

Even more amused, the man told her where his brother would be that evening. She was to meet him just at dusk near a certain corner—she would know him because he would be wearing a panama hat.

He wore the panama—also a loose-collared white-linen shirt, smooth grey slacks, and white shoes, which she realized were espadrilles. His eyes under the hatbrim were shadowed, but his smile when she stopped before him was kind, which surprised her. Then she understood: he was not young. Seen dimly like this, where he stood between streetlights, details were lost but she had an impression of grey hair, of settled lines, of inner composure. The smile was understanding and welcoming, light-years beyond youth. She felt herself stop fully and come to rest before this regard of eyes unseen. He simply stood, squared toward her, and let her see his compassion. She said, "Ahh," a little escape of breath, as if she had found her house after being lost, as if she felt rain on a hot day, as if she closed with a completing idea.

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"You've come," he said.

"Yes, he said you needed—"

"Ah, yes, so I do. But you don' seem ze type." His accent was slight, only a trace of buzz and altered tones.

She told him in a rush about her punctual habits, her high-school bookkeeping course. She promised to learn whatever was necessary, almost offered to pay him to take her on. As her enthusiasm grew, his smile cooled.

"You will need clothes more fetching. The hair, that is okay, long like that. But the shoes—" he looked at her low-heeled and mellow working pumps and the curve of his mouth changed, he was curt "—how can you think to wear such shoes? You need high heels. We look our best in my business."

"Let me try," she said.

He considered, tipping his head to one side, increasing the shadows on his face. "Sometimes we have continental clients, and you might be—" He decided. "Come, then. I will show you headquar*tairs*. First, though, we might as well see if we can take along some—company." Shifting his hips in a way that changed his whole aspect, rolling his body to face the sidewalk, he surveyed the few people still on the street.

And suddenly she knew. He was looking over the men and she, with her grease-stained blouse and her too tight skirt, was letting herself stand beside him while he did it. She was Lacey, who worked in Mr. Simon's jewelry store, who went to church sometimes, who kept ferns and had never lost a one, who would be learning to travel to Amsterdam and come back with diamonds. Who wanted—should want, did want—to marry sweet Josh and have two children.

Turning deliberately, she walked away, pausing to toss off her shoes, and then she ran. It was dark now—store windows were bright, passing cars lit the way. People turned as she ran by.

When she came to Bonniwell Street, she noticed with confusion that the bakery wasn't there any more, there was no space where it could have been. On the bridge, she stopped and looked for a long time into the depths where the river roared. She gauged the height of the railing, the distance down.

But the apartment on the hill drew her, there were things she wanted to do. She would water the ferns—they would die without her. She would pick up the phone and talk to Josh, he would have missed her this evening on the running path. She would *run* up the

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hill—she was strong, she was light and perfectly balanced on her bare feet.

Running on toward the apartment, she was not tired, she was not heavy. She had learned to run—it was part of being pastry-wise.

On that same day, in a small town in Eastern Europe, a new shop appeared right on the path that Mirza took to go to the bicycle man. He had ridden into a hole in the street and bent his front wheel, and this was his first trip for repair. The new shop had blue mirrors on the wall inside and a neon sign that said in English, *Chicken Turnovers—American Pastries.* Mirza loved anything American. He rode a bicycle only because motorcycles were expensive and cars even more so. America to him was the land of the free highway, where everyone traveled at high speed. Propping up his bent-wheeled bike, he went in, fingering the change in his pocket, wondering if he had enough.

The woman behind the counter was plump, with perfect skin and blonde frizzed hair pulled up on the sides and held in back with a clip. She wore a red-and-blue uniform as brief as was allowed in his country.

"I'll have a chicken—uh—" He checked the menu on the wall to be sure of the name, seeing at the same time that the price was very low. This information made his voice stronger. "A chicken turnover," he said.

The woman looked at him with hooded eyes and almost smiled.

"What style you want?" She spoke with a tangy accent.

"Style?"

"Yah—we got Texas style, Cajun, Maryland, Iowa Pure—all kinds."

She would tell him about Texas and Iowa. He would try, over time, all the styles and lose his job at the plant because of his frequent visits to the American shop. Then the woman would put him in touch with one of her brothers, who had connections in the passport section of the American Embassy but who would demand a lot of money. *He* would send Mirza to another relative, who would show him a powerful Harley-Davidson and offer him the use of it and money besides if he would make occasional runs over the border. Sometime in the near future Mirza would have to choose between pedaling and riding dangerously.

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a *NEW* Inspector Donoghue story by

PETER TURNBULL

Chief Inspector Fabian Donoghue shut his eyes as the scenes-of-crime officer raised the camera and pressed the flash. One more tacky black-and-white photograph to be deposited on his desk later in the day. Even in these days of high technology, of computers and electronic surveillance, the police prefer black-and-white photographs of the scene of the crime. Color is used if relevant, but color-printing lacks the depth, the sense of the three-dimensional.

Colorizers of such film classics as Casablanca *and* The Maltese Falcon, *please take note . . .*

ABERNETHY'S COLLAR

by PETER TURNBULL

Two guys are sitting in a hotel room. One pulls a gun and blows the other apart. He uses hollow-nosed 22-caliber bullets. He puts three in a close grouping into the chest of the other guy, who does not die so much as disappear.

Bloodily.

It is a small room. The gun has no silencer.

The living guy gets up from the chair and leaves the room. People are milling in the corridor and staircase. Lots of people see him. Good descriptions are available. The guy doesn't mind being seen. Some people follow him as he leaves the hotel.

He hails a cab. The city has swallowed him.

Chief Inspector Fabian Donoghue shut his eyes as the scenes-of-crime officer raised the camera and pressed the flash. One more

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tacky black-and-white photograph to be deposited on his desk later in the day. Even in these days of high technology, of computers and electronic surveillance, the police prefer black-and-white photographs of the scene of the crime. Color is used if relevant, but color-printing lacks the depth, the sense of the three-dimensional.

Donoghue turned and left the room, walked down the staircase into the foyer and the street. It was 11:00 A.M., Wednesday, early April. It was cold and windy, raining lightly but steadily. Donoghue looked left toward the park and the bowling greens near the junction of Sauchiehall and Argyle Street and then to his right along the canyon of Sauchiehall Street to the Lorne Hotel, much smarter and grander than the grubby homeless persons' accommodation, laughingly called a hotel, on the steps of which he now stood, in one upstairs room of which had been staged a major contravention of the Scottish Common Law. Opposite Donoghue was a bank of soot-encrusted tenements, and between him and the tenements was the road. Cars swished by in the rain. Donoghue thought Glasgow never looked her best in the rain. He wondered if any city did.

He got into his Rover, maneuvered out into the traffic stream between two police jeeps, and drove west along Sauchiehall, left into Argyle, and back toward the tall angular buildings in the center of Scotland's premier city, in the shadows of which, at Charing Cross, was P Division police station.

Donoghue signed himself in at the bar, checked his pigeonhole for messages, and went upstairs to the CID corridor and his room at the end of the corridor. He hung his hat on the stand and peeled off his Burberry. He took his gold-plated hunter from his waistcoat pocket, noted the time—11:15—and opened a file he headed JONES HOTEL MURDER. It would do until the deceased was identified. He lit his pipe and wrote a summary of the morning's events. When he'd finished it, he phoned his wife in Edinburgh—a murder, he said, just come in, he might be working late tonight. She sighed heavily down the phone and said thank you for giving her an early warning, she'd take the kids to visit her mother.

Donoghue sat back in his chair. He clasped his hands behind his head. Two men. A hotel room. Ten on a weekday morning. One shoots the other. No preamble—nothing.

Dr. Chan, the police surgeon, pronounced the man dead. In the event, even for the meticulous, highly professional Dr. Chan, it was under the circumstances nothing more than a formality. Raymond

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Sussock—tall, gaunt, at fifty-five old for a cop, on active duty as senior officer at the scene—satisfied himself that the deceased had been photographed from every angle, and only then did he allow the body to be removed. It was lifted onto a stretcher, and Sussock got his first real glimpse of the face—a plain, everyday face, just another in a city of three million ordinary faces. It had belonged to a man in his mid-twenties who had died bloodily in a room in a cheap lodging house. Sussock watched as the body was covered with a blanket and he followed as it was carried down the stairs. He posted a man outside the room, leaving the bumbling, bespectacled Elliot Bothwell dusting for latents. He had already found plenty of prints, as one would expect in a hotel such as the Jones, and was also able to say that someone had been wearing gloves. No prizes for guessing who that had been.

In the room, as soon as he was left alone, Elliot Bothwell stopped brushing the iron fittings and lay the fine squirrel-hair brush down. He looked about him. Room 24, fourth room on the second floor—a bare and naked place to die. It alarmed him that it reminded him so much of his own bedroom in the house in Queen's Park he shared with his mother. What would they think if he died in bed? Would they look around his room and think, Bare and naked, nothing achieved in life?

Bothwell sat in the chair in which the police officers surmised the murderer had sat. He looked at the single bed and the wall behind it, both blood-stained, both grimy, no decoration on the wall, just a thin lick of paint, just a couple of threadbare blankets on the bed. One chair, a bedside table, a wardrobe. A carpet, threadbare like the blankets. A window set high in the wall—too high to look out of, dirty and stained with city grime. The city placed homeless persons in this room and rooms like it, individually or in families. They lived in such "hotels" scattered across the city for weeks, months. In conditions of great stress, they drank away their welfare checks, they beat their children, they thrust knives into each other, stole from each other, made each other pregnant. Bothwell thought of the stories the walls of this room could tell and something chilled him.

Richard King was a chubby, bearded detective constable. He was twenty-five years old. He sat in the hotel manager's office. He found the manager to be an agitated man. To King he looked quite ridiculous in his loud shirt with a flower pattern—such a contrast to King's delicate Quaker wife who wore only pastel shades.

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"Three weeks," said the manager. He flung his arms about as he talked—or, as King thought, shouted. The man had had the room for three weeks. "These are new glasses, by the way."

"What?"

The manager pointed to his spectacles. "These are new."

"I see. Just what kind of man was he? Tell me about him."

"Who?"

"The deceased." King flicked back a page of his notebook. "Rory McGill. What was he like?"

"Just a guy, a regular guy. He got drunk once, I had to warn him—said I'd cancel his mandate if he came in drunk again. They all get drunk, but you've got to assert your authority. You have to assert your authority, I've been doing this job ten years, I'm thirty-nine and these are new glasses, by the way."

"Any friends?"

"Yes, I've got friends."

"I'm pleased for you, sir," said King, "but I'm more interested in the deceased."

"Well, he got on with the others, but I didn't see a special pal. He was just like a lot of young men."

"How old was he? Do you know?"

"Mid-twenties. I heard the shots. I leaped up the stairs. I saw the body slumped on the bed. I'll need to give that room a special clean out."

"Yes. Any family?"

"Look, I don't know. You have his last address—they come and they go, these people."

"Nobody visited him?"

"No."

"Sure?"

"Certain. They can't have guests in their rooms. They have to see guests in the foyer or outside. Guests don't get past me or my staff. I'm the man."

"Fair enough. So tell me how the guy got into the room."

"What guy?"

"The guy who shot McGill."

There was a frantic waving of arms, then the manager said, "I don't know, I'll ask the staff."

"We already have. They don't know, either. They said to ask you. They did say that he didn't come in this morning, that he must have come in last night."

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"Why do they think that?"

"Rory McGill was fully clothed, including his raincoat and outside shoes. If the murderer had come into the hotel early this morning it's likely McGill would be in pajamas."

"But he was dressed, of course he was," the manager recalled. "I saw him. Blood everywhere—I mean *blood*. The smell. There was still the smell of gunpowder, and there was the smell of blood. I've never seen a guy shot before. It doesn't happen in Glasgow."

"Yes, it does, all too frequently. And it happened in your hotel less than two hours ago. Tell me about the man who shot him."

"He was the most frightening man I ever saw."

"Yes?"

"He didn't care about being seen. I mean he just didn't care. Can you believe that? I'm running up the stairs, taking two, three at a time, yelling at people to get out of the way because I'm the man, me, nobody else, and this guy comes out of twenty-four. I stop in my tracks. He stares at me. I guess he knew I was the man, I guess it's my bearing and the way I can handle authority."

"I guess it is," said King patiently.

"He stared at me, defying me to say something or do something."

"Did you?"

"No. I stepped back. I guess I showed myself up in front of the guests, the man ought to have done something. But he had a gun."

"Did you see the weapon?"

"No, he must have put it away."

"They tell us this man leaving the room, the principal suspect, was very well dressed."

"He looked the part, no problem—tall, moustache, slim, cashmere coat, document case. He looked like a businessman. I guess the gun was in the document case."

"Old? Young?"

"Late twenties, I'd think."

"Would you recognize him again?"

"Sure, no problem. Like I said, he just didn't care about being seen. He even stood there, letting everybody, including me, the man, clock him. See, that's what got me—you'd think that anybody that just shot somebody couldn't have cleared the pitch quick enough, but not this guy. He walked away from twenty-four without a care in the world, calmly down the stairs and out into the street. I told a couple of the residents to follow him."

"You told them, knowing he had a gun? That was brave of you."

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"Yes, but I'm the man. He got into a taxi and rode off. The residents came back. By then the police had arrived, but the guy had gone. So had Rory McGill, in a way. Guess he went first. The shoes are old but these are new glasses."

"I come over as soon as I heard it broadcast on the radio." The cab driver sat forward in the chair of the interview room. He was a round, red-faced man. He had a warm smile and a warm look in his eyes. Abernethy liked him. "Not the radio radio—I mean the short-wave we use in the cabs to keep in touch with control, and control with us."

"Yes, we contacted all the fleet operators on the off-chance one of their cabs picked up this man outside Jones Hotel this morning. We would have been lost if an owner operator had picked him up."

"Aye, that would have been a blank for you right enough. Those owner operators don't have radios. They don't need them, just cruise around on their own. I'd started the day well with a good run to Helensburgh—got out of the city and down the water, magic. I was returning to see what was going down in the town, do a few short city drops before lunch, and I was barreling along Sauchiehall Street when this gentleman hails me from the opposite curb."

"A smartly dressed man?" Abernethy glanced at the police mutual calendar on the wall. It was the only decoration in the room.

"Very. Expensive coat, black briefcase—had to be a young businessman. Dark trousers, dark shoes. Very calm. I saw a couple of people looking at him, but he wasn't bothered about them—a bit nose in the air, if you know what I mean. I thought he must be an Englishman, but a fare's a fare."

"He may well be," said Abernethy, who felt self-conscious and avoided even the warm eyes of the taxi driver, being tall, angular, and still, at twenty-one, with a trace of residual acne.

"So I swing the cab in a tight U and he got in. He said Central Station. That's all. I didn't pick up an accent."

"I was going to ask you."

"No. He didn't speak enough. I like to chat to my fares—I get some interesting people, some sad cases, some nice people—but this guy wasn't having any. So I got the message and stopped the patter and I just got him to the station. What I wanted really, anyway, short drops in the city. I picked up another fare right away."

"How did he pay?"

"Cash."

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"A note?"

"Crisp, brand new Clydesdale Bank ten-pound note."

Abernethy smiled at the cab driver.

"Och, aye, Rory did a few daft things, but he wasn't a bad guy." The woman pressed the tissue to her eyes. She sat on the settee. She had a tenancy in Possil—the house smelled of damp, the carpet was tacky, the child was grubby and cried loudly. The woman was fat and squeezed herself into clothes two sizes too small.

Montgomerie looked out of the window and saw a wasteland of rough pasture surrounded by low-rise tenements. Inside the flat, the gas fire hissed. The curtains were partially drawn and not a lot of light entered the flat. He glanced up at the light cord. There was no bulb to switch on, anyway.

"Dead."

"I'm afraid so."

"Oh."

"You don't seem so bothered. I mean, was he or was he not your husband?" Montgomerie saw that the woman was beginning to notice him. They always did, eventually—tall, chiseled features, down-turned moustache. His mother always said he'd break hearts before he settled down.

"He was my husband, and he wasn't."

"Meaning, please?"

"Meaning he was my comman-law man. We were never married in a church nor nothing—he's not even the father of the bairn." The woman nodded at the grubby, squealing child in the cot. "See, we weren't together that long."

"You split up?"

"Uh huh. Three weeks since. He knocked me about. I mean that's normal, you expect to get a doing off your man from time to time, but he went over the score. Knocked me about for five hours solid, I had bruises and lumps everywhere. It was my tenancy, so I got the police to lift him. I don't know where he went."

"Jones Hotel."

"Aye, he'd been there before. His last woman threw him out for the same reason."

"Bit of a thug, was he?"

"Aye," said the woman abstractedly. So this is what dreams amount to, a damp house in an inner-city wilderness, a crying babe, a hissing gas fire, no light in the room. No man. "He was a wee ned.

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He's done time. He'd take a good drink and then get into bother with the law. Never got more than ninety days, but he had fines to pay. The Sheriff kept giving him fines, but they never bothered him. He never had a penny, the amount was of no concern—fined a pound, fined a thousand pounds, it was just figures on a fine notification." She paused. "I miss him, I do. See me, I'm fat, I've got no nice clothes, I've got some man's child. I go into town and all I see are the young ones with nice figures in jeans tucked into cowboy boots. I'm not going to get a man. See that song that says, 'I'd rather my man beat me than he ups and leaves me,' I know what it means, so I do. He wasn't so hard, really—I guess that's why he hit me. He didn't like the jail—that hurt him when fines couldn't. He used to swagger about, kid on he was some kind of hard man, could do ninety days on his back, he said—but he didn't like it."

"Not many do," said Montgomerie. "Twenty-three hours a day in a small cell with three other blokes and one chamber pot for company. It's not easy, but then it's not meant to be. Who's his next of kin, then, if it isn't you?"

"His mother. They stay in the Cadder, up Maryhill way."

"Yes, I know the Cadder."

The woman gave an address on Skirsa Street. Montgomerie noted it down.

"He was a McGill of the mad McGills. The whole family's mental—pure insane, so they are."

"How do you mean?"

"I don't mean mental mental, I mean full of pure badness. There's not one of them that hasn't got a record, and that includes wee Simon. He's twelve. He goes around staving in car windscreens with a metal bar and calls it fun."

"Some family."

"You're not kidding. Their star turn is Hughie. He's twenty-seven and serving life for a premeditated stabbing and they worship him for it. He's got a life term, which is more than any other family member ever got, and that makes him top dog. I mean, can you imagine it, any other family's proud of their relatives who maybe got a good job or made a good marriage, but not the McGills—they're proud of Hughie because he got life."

"Unbelievable," said Montgomerie, who in fact could quite well believe it. He had come across such attitudes all too frequently, like the grown men who referred to their arrests as being captured, as though they were playing some game or were in a war.

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"So what happened to Rory?" the woman asked.

"I can't tell you," said Montgomerie. "The Housing Department gave us your name and address as his next of kin. I only told you of his death because I thought you were his next of kin. Did he have enemies?"

"Some—a few." The woman looked longingly at Montgomerie. He was used to reading the thoughts she was having. Oh, I wish this was my man—so handsome, so tall, straight out of a romance novel.

"How many?"

"Every enemy the mad McGills made, plus a few of his own."

"Like who?"

The woman shrugged. "Just other neds. You know what neds are like, pals one minute, enemies the next, pals again the minute after. It's all down to the flavor of the month whether you're an enemy or a friend."

"Who'd want to fill him in? Anybody?"

"Anybody? Everybody. Just open a telephone directory and stick a pin on any page, you're bound to be within ten names of someone who'd want to cool him, either because it's him, or because he's a McGill, or both."

"Popular man, as you say. But I'm asking for a name—did he have an enemy who stood out at all?"

"Not that I can tell you of. I don't know what enemies he made in the last three weeks. You have to realize Rory could attract enemies like a jam jar attracts wasps. You'll need to see his mother—and when you do, tell her Rory owes me money."

"You'll have to tell her that yourself."

"Waste of time."

Abernethy scribbled on his notepad, the phone crocked against his shoulder. "That's correct, sir, yes," he said. "A ten-pound note—if you could. We would be obliged, it is a murder inquiry. Thank you." He put the phone down. He was young for a cop, without a great deal of experience, but he still felt keenly his lack of arrests since he had been in the CID. When the other detectives were talking in the canteen about their collars, he had to remain silent. He knew he had time on his side, but he wanted a good collar, just one, the one that would get him established, the one that would make him feel he was paying his way instead of freeloading. He picked up the phone again and dialed a two-figure, internal number. "Abernethy here, sir," he said.

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"Yes, Abernethy," Donoghue replied sharply.

"I've interviewed the cab driver, sir. He dropped the suspect at Central Station. Not much use to us there. He could have been getting a train out of town or just covering his tracks—you know, taking a second taxi somewhere else."

"I think the second is more likely." Donoghue, in his office, held the phone in one hand and his pipe in the other. "This man is too confident and calculating to let us know he's taken a train which could be boarded by the Railway Police, who would be able to recognize him easily following the description we could give. No, he's still in town. Cab driver say anything about him?"

"Not really, sir. The man didn't say enough for the cabbie to be able to pin down an accent. In terms of attitude, the cabbie thought him a bit arrogant. He described him as a bit nose in the air."

"That ties in quite well with his apparent attitude to the murder of McGill, walking away like he'd shot a coconut at a fairground stall."

"The interesting point is, sir, and I think this might be a breakthrough, that the man paid for his fare with a brand new banknote—the cabbie still had it. I noted the serial number and phoned the head office of the Clydesdale Bank. They're checking their records now and are phoning us back. I think—I hope—that they might be able to tell us what was the circulation outlet for that particular note. I thought perhaps the high-street banks could match it against a cashed check or one of a few cashed checks, or money tendered from a service till or some such. Anyway, they're working on it and are calling us back."

Donoghue put his pipe down and sat back. "Abernethy, that is an excellent piece of work."

"Thank you, sir." Abernethy hunched over his desk, holding the phone close to his ear. He might make it, after all.

"Let me know of any developments."

"Of course, sir."

Both men replaced their receivers at the same time. Donoghue said to his smoke-filled, but, save for him, otherwise empty office, "Yes, Abernethy, you could very well grow into the CID."

He scribbled a brief summary of Abernethy's verbal submission into the file, still just a mass of jottings, with times dividing up the recording. There was plenty of time to tidy it up and pass it on for typing. He glanced over the notes. They had a name, Rory McGill,

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but he had still to be positively identified. They had a good description of the murder suspect, and that was really about all.

He filled his pipe with the special mix he had specially made up for him by a tobacconist in the city, a Dutch base with a twist of dark shag for depth of flavor and to slow the burning rate. There was, as yet, no hint of a motivation for the murder. There was not even the sign of a struggle. The murder victim knew the murder suspect well enough to sit up talking with him all night without trying to raise an alarm.

Donoghue lit his pipe with his gold-plated lighter and pondered upon the personality of the murderer—the man who had evidently sat up all night with Rory McGill and could have shot him dead and made good his escape in the small hours, yet waited until 10:00 A.M. before he fired three shots and then calmly walked out of the hotel, along the corridors and down the stairs, teeming with horrified and curious residents, and equally calmly walking along the street for a few yards before hailing a cab. He had cut it damn fine. The 999 call had been dialed by the duty receptionist as soon as the shots were fired and the man had gotten away with only seconds to spare. It was as though he had wanted to be seen.

He had wanted to be seen.

Donoghue closed his eyes.

He wanted to be seen.

The phone on his desk rang. He snatched it up. "D.I. Donoghue."

"Alexander," said a calmly authoritative voice, "Assistant Chief Constable."

"Sir!"

"I've received your request and, of course, under the circumstances I will approve the carrying of firearms for the arrest in this case. I'm sending a messenger over with the necessary documents."

"Thank you, sir."

"Making progress?"

"A little, sir." Not much, sir, would, thought Donoghue, be a more truthful answer, though he was still preoccupied with absorbing the impact of the realization that the murderer of Rory McGill had been wearing a disguise.

"Well, best of luck."

"Thank you, sir." Donoghue put the telephone down.

If, he thought, the murderer had been in disguise, then he would have most probably disguised himself to be the opposite of what he was in life. A wealthy man would disguise himself as a pauper, a

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down-and-out, if he wanted to throw pursuers off the scent. Extending the same logic, Donoghue felt he could reasonably assume that the murderer of Rory McGill, who everyone who saw him thought was a wealthy businessman, did in fact come from the same social milieu as his victim: Skirsa Street in the Cadder.

Again the phone on his desk rang. Still recoiling from the conclusions of his reasoning, Donoghue picked up the phone, somewhat less readily than before. "Donoghue," he said.

"Reynolds," said the voice on the other end of the line.

"Yes, sir." Donoghue pictured the tall, silver-haired pathologist sitting at his desk in his office next to the operating theater where he cut open human bodies with the same monotonous regularity that most men carve their evening meal.

"Interesting finding," said Reynolds. "Cause of death of the McGill corpse is, as you might expect, gunshot wounds. One particularly caused the heart to explode. In each case, the internal tissue damage was massive and I think the bullets must have been hollow-nosed rather than the conventional pointed-nosed variety. I've sent the remains of the bullets—at least those pieces I could find—to Dr. Kay at Forensic Science in Pitt Street. I daresay she will be contacting you on the course of events."

"Thank you, sir."

"Well, to continue, I opened him up, anyway. The bullets had done half my job, but I thought I'd take a peep inside to see if there was anything of interest in there."

"And?"

"A condom," said Reynolds in a deadpan voice.

"A condom?"

"A condom. It was sealed at the top, tied with a length of fine catgut, the other end of which was tied to a tooth. The condom was in his stomach."

"Good God."

"Yes, it must have taken some considerable practice before that stunt could be perfected. He couldn't have concealed it like that for more than a few hours. He certainly couldn't have eaten anything, for example. I assume that the catgut was to enable him to recover the item at will—pull it back up. It would also prevent the item from being assumed into the digestive system."

"So what's inside the condom, sir? Heroin?"

"Probably," said Reynolds. "I haven't opened it. I only open bodies.

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I've sent it along to Pitt Street with the bullets, but I can tell you that the contents did seem powdery."

"Well, thank you, sir."

"Pleased to be of assistance," said Reynolds. "Good day."

Montgomerie was surprised that he hadn't connected earlier. The McGills of the Cadder, a branch of the family in every street in Cadder, Rory McGill's particular cell in Skirsa Street. The mad McGills, the mental McGills, an extended family that contained every form of ned, toe rag, bampot, headbanger, violent petty criminal, wife beater, child molester—and murderer in the case of Hughie McGill, doing life in Peterhead for a senseless act of violence, stabbing a man who had offended him two days earlier so that the man drowned in his own blood and Hughie was exalted and revered by his family. The McGill family, he recalled from his days as a beat cop, always married as closely as they could, cousins marrying cousins, if possible—if not, then second cousins would do. If anyone in the Cadder crossed the McGills, they may as well give up hope of a quiet life.

Montgomerie recalled the first time he encountered the McGills, an incident when a McGill assaulted another young man because the other young man's grandfather had insulted Grandfather McGill when the grandfathers were themselves young men, before the Cadder was built and settled. That was the McGills. And the very next incident that brought the McGills to the attention of the police chilled Montgomerie then, and it chilled him still. Often lying alone in his bed in his flat, he thought of it and his flesh crawled.

There was a man in the Cadder, who was gentle, unusually tall, and high-grade mentally handicapped. He was very vulnerable. One day in broad daylight, outside the shops, the McGills surrounded this man, stood in a circle around him, not just the kids but the adults as well, about ten of them, and they just stared at him and kept opening and shutting their mouths without making a sound. Everywhere this man looked there was a pair of eyes burning into him and a mouth below them just opening and shutting. He slapped one of them and ran home and locked himself in his room. The slapped McGill went to the police with the others and said, "He assaulted me, so he did, and I've got witnesses." And a completely harmless man got a criminal record—nominal, but a record just the same. That was the McGill family.

And now one of them had been murdered . . .

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"They are twenty-two-caliber, hollow-nosed bullets," said Jean Kay, Ph.D., forensic scientist. She was a small, wiry woman in the closing stages of her career, during the course of which she had established herself as one of, if not the leading forensic scientist north of the border. She was retained by the Strathclyde Police, but her services were unashamedly sought by the Highlands and Islands Police, the Central Region Police, the Tayside and Grampian Force, and less frequently by the competitive Lothian and Borders Police. "A nasty weapon. I don't like guns at the best of times, but hollow-nosed bullets— Messy."

"Indeed." Donoghue swapped the phone from one ear to the other to ease the soreness of his left ear, which was caused by a good deal of telephone work that morning, but the cord got in the way of his notepad, so he moved the phone back to his left ear, soreness or no soreness. "In fact, Dr. Reynolds said the bullets had done half his job. I daresay he meant they had opened up the body a bit."

"I can well imagine. They are basically exploding bullets, and for our purposes that means I've had difficulty obtaining a good rifling pattern. In fact, to be perfectly honest, I haven't got a pattern at all. There's some scoring on the parts of casing I've been sent—heavy scoring, in fact—which might indicate that the weapon in question was, or is, not a well-cared-for piece of equipment. It's probably a dirty gun, full of grit and grime. That might be significant."

"Might indeed," said Donoghue. In fact, he thought it could very well be significant. The firearms which surfaced from time to time in the housing schemes were often more deadly to the user than the intended victim.

"The condom contained heroin."

"It doesn't really surprise me." Donoghue scribbled the information on his notepad.

"It was heavily cut with battery acid. If the thing had burst inside the man, he'd have died quickly and painfully. The catgut is catgut, it doesn't have any distinguishing features I have been able to detect. I'll work away at it, but I don't think I'll be able to get any relevant information from it. The condom could have come from anywhere, of course. The packet could have given us some information about location of purchase, but that was not submitted."

"It wasn't in his pockets," said Donoghue, "otherwise we would have let you have it, of course. In fact, there wasn't anything in the man's pockets, which were turned out at the locus of the offense—not a penny, not a piece of paper, nothing." It wasn't that uncommon

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among homeless people. Often they just had a signing-on card for unemployment benefit plus a few coins, and that was all the deceased, in this case, had had in *his* possession. He had left them in the top drawer of the bedside table. Nothing in his pockets, nothing under the bed, nothing in the wardrobe.

Montgomerie took two uniformed cops with him when he went to the McGill household. It was in the kind of large three-story, five-apartment building the city allocated to large families. The small front garden was neglected and overgrown and the front door looked as though it had been attacked with a hatchet, though Montgomerie doubted that the damage to the door meant that somebody had been brave enough to go up against the McGills. The damage, in fact, was far more likely to have been caused during a feud within the extended family.

Montgomerie knocked on the door of the apartment.

It was opened quickly, widely. The formidable Mrs. McGill stood in the doorway. She was matriarch of the dynasty and, thought Montgomerie, not, as the expression was, someone to go home to with a broken wage packet. She stared at the policemen with a what-is-it-this-time expression. And when she was told as gently as Montgomerie could tell her, she wailed and screamed. Members of the family ran to the door and children were dispatched to the other McGill households to carry the dreadful news.

Mrs. McGill and two adult daughters went with the police to the mortuary at the Glasgow Royal Infirmary. The sheet was parted and Mrs. McGill began to wail again.

"Positive I.D. on Rory McGill as the deceased," said Montgomerie on the phone in Dr. Reynolds' office.

"Glad you phoned," said Donoghue. "He was full of heroin," and he told Montgomerie about the condom and the catgut.

The Clydesdale Bank reported back to Abernethy.

"The note you were inquiring about, sir," said the cultured voice on the other end of the telephone line.

"Yes?"

"It was part of a consignment sent to Simpson Engineering two days ago for their weekly wage payments."

"I don't think I know of Simpson Engineering."

"It's a small company—they make diesel engines for small boats. No more than a hundred workers. They have premises on the Hil-

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lington Industrial Estate. Their Wages Department might be able to tie in the note with a particular employee. Some firms are very meticulous, others less so."

"Well, at least it points us in the right direction. Thank you—thank you, indeed."

"Indeed?" said the man. "Indeed?"

"Indeed," said Abernethy. He was anxious. He could scent the kill—this was to be his pinch, his first major collar in the CID. Abernethy's collar—he knew that was how it would be called in the future. Abernethy's collar.

The man glanced up at Abernethy and then at the two cops standing behind him. The man's desk was small. It had two telephones and behind it was a green filing cabinet. The office window looked out onto a brick wall. "In connection with a serious incident, you say."

"Very serious," said Abernethy. "We believe the man we would like to interview is employed here, as a waged rather than a salaried employee. He's in his late twenties and is not likely to have reported for work today."

"He should be easy enough to locate then," said the personnel officer, whose name, on his desk, was J.J. Simpson. It was no doubt, thought Abernethy, a family firm. J.J. Simpson picked up his phone, did not dial but waited, and then said, "Julie, it's me, J.J. We're assisting the police with inquiries—could you do me a wee favor? Yes, now. —That doesn't matter, this can take priority. If C.F. complains, just refer him to me. Now could you get me the names of all male factory floor-workers, run off a photocopy, put a tick at the side of each man in his twenties, check the clocking cards, and if any of those men haven't reported for work this morning—"

"Or were late by a matter of two hours," Abernethy cut in.

"Or were late by two hours or more," repeated J.J. Simpson, "then underline that or those names. As quickly as you can, thank you." Simpson replaced the phone. "It'll probably take her ten to fifteen minutes. Would you gentlemen care to take a seat?"

In fact, it took Julie twenty-five minutes, but when she arrived, she came with gold-dust. She knocked on the door and entered J.J.'s office. She was a plump girl who would be more fetching if she wore a longer skirt. She handed a sheet of paper to Simpson and stood curiously, eagerly awaiting developments.

"Thank you, Julie, that will be all," said J.J. Simpson.

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"Yes, sir." Julie turned and left the office.

Simpson scanned the sheet and raised his eyebrows. "Well, she's certainly done the trick. There's only one man in the age range you're interested in who has not reported for work today."

"Name?"

"McGill. Bernard McGill. Here, see for yourself." He handed the sheet of paper to Abernethy.

"McGill," Abernethy repeated disbelievingly.

"Not a particularly pleasant individual," said Simpson."Not popular, a bit of a loner, quite unreliable as a worker. He lives with his wife and young child in a scheme north of the water."

"The Cadder?" suggested Abernethy.

"The Cadder," affirmed the personnel manager. "Would you like his address?"

The cops went into the Cadder in two cars and two vans. They pulled up outside an address in Pladda Street, ran from the cars, burst open the controlled entry system, and ran up the stairs to the door one up on the right with McGILL on the nameplate.

"Punt it in," said Abernethy, nervously holding his weapon.

A hugely built sergeant of the uniform branch put his shoulder to the door. It splintered inward. A woman screamed.

The cops ran in.

Bernard McGill sat on the sofa in his living room. He looked shocked and pale as the cops stood over him, four .38s with cocked hammers pointing at his skull.

On the table in front of him were plastic bags of white powder, a set of scales, and a .22 Walther PPK.

The woman screamed hysterically. The infant cried, uncomprehending. Montgomerie leaned forward, picked up the Walther delicately, and dropped it into a self-sealing cellophane sachet.

Then Bernard McGill relaxed back onto the settee and began to smile. He said, "See, him, the little rat, he stole my stuff, he wouldn't tell me where he hid it. So I shot him. This makes me bigger than Hughie. Hughie, he just stabbed a guy. But me, Bernard McGill, I'm the man who blew away his own brother, and nobody can take that away from me."

"Q"

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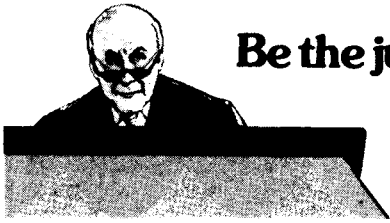

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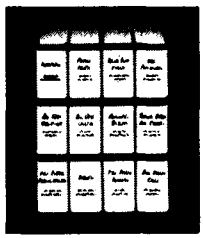

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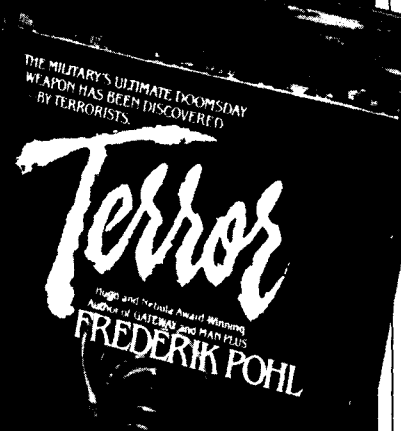
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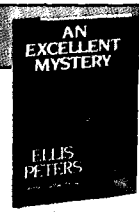

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